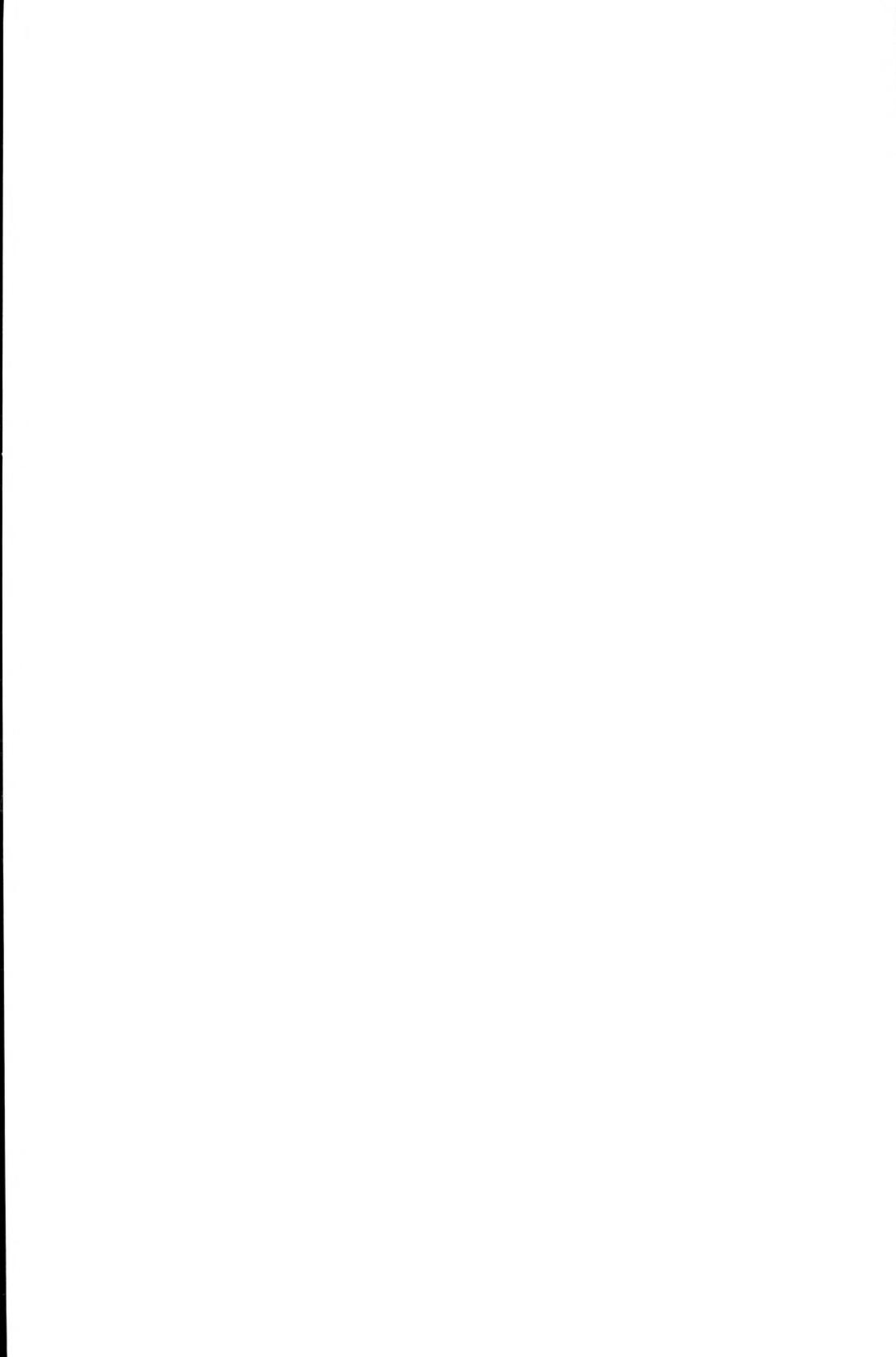




QUAD
2003



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Birmingham-Southern College's Premier Literary Journal



The Editors:

From L to R: John Seay, Editor-in-Chief, senior English major from Birmingham; Erin Robbins, Art Editor, sophomore Biology-Psychology and Philosophy double major from Birmingham; Jeff Parsons, Poetry Editor, sophomore Secondary Education and Language Arts Specialist from Birmingham; and Liz Patty, Prose Editor, sophomore English and Creative Writing major from Birmingham.



Congratulations to Alex Scokel for his story “Denouement” which won “Best Story” in this issue of *Quad*. Elizabeth Frye’s poem “Tuesday’s Words” won “Best Poem,” while Rachel Higgin’s art won “Best Art.” All winners receive prizes and free dogs.

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Majnun the Mad, Laila the lost

SAMAN Khaled

I'M NOT good

And I'M NOT A "SIR"

I'M just wood

And A little stir

A little murmur through a stack of twigs

A night breeze split from date palm leaves, sifted through figs
from a far away desert

under a lonely moon

where a madman calls for his beloved

and in answer sees the dunes

Rise up and bow down and bend in smiles so beautiful
before closing neatly, nicely and serenely around him.

I AM the whisper of his last breath into that cold night.

Crackled up through the firemother of the smoke drifts

of the bedouins who now camp on that site.

and tell tales of loves lost

and hear wails of a madman's cost

for loving what was not there.

but it is just wind.

ONE
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ONE
UNO
ONE
UNO
ONE

Inheritance

Lauren McClendon

The most beautiful woman I know is sitting on the curb in front of a bar waiting for me to pay her tab and walk her home. Her name is Marilla Diane Stephens and she prefers to be called “Mari” – “mah-ri,” not mary. Now it’s 1:00 a.m. She keeps telling anyone who’ll listen that this is only the third time in her lifetime that she’s had to be walked home. Earlier tonight she called me, saying that she wanted me to come with her tonight, for support and as a “faux beau,” so other guys would think I was her boyfriend and leave her alone. Earlier tonight she told anyone who’d listen that I’m her best friend.

“Davy has been great to me and for me,” Mari, hand over her heart, explained to this one girl earlier. “I swear to god, I’d be completely lost without him. He is my anchor, my tether, my rock.”

She had then draped her other arm around me, for effect and for balance. She was close to falling off the barstool. This was before she was really drunk and on the curb, but after she’d given up on her brother. We were supposed to meet Matt, her brother, at the bar, but he never showed up. We did this—well, they did this yearly, to mark the anniversary of their sister’s death. At 10:30, after officially waiting an hour and a half for him, Marilla started doing vodka shooters. She switched to Sangria around 11:00. She took a time-out for a while and humored me by eating the pretzels I presented to her.

“The closest thing to a piece of bread in the building,” I said.

“I appreciate it. Order something for yourself,” she smiled.

By midnight, she’d moved onto whiskey-sours. I tried to keep count from across the room. Three or four in half an hour. I was talking to some guy about the virtues of Linux over Windows when I looked back to her and saw she was nursing a beer.

“Excuse me,” I tell Windows Guy. I walked over to the bar. “You look like you’re almost finished.”

She swayed a little when she talked. “Damn skippy. Let me get my bearings, then we go. How far is my house? Five blocks?”

“Yeah. Grab your coat, and I’ll meet you outside. You can get there right?”

“I’m not that drunk, David. Cross my heart. Help me off the stool?” She slumped forward onto my chest. “You’re comfy.”

I met her outside a few seconds later.

The most beautiful woman I know pulls herself to her feet and waltzes over to me. She presents her arm and hooks it around mine. Mari tries to skip and hums, “We’re off to see the Wizard.” She laughs at me laughing at her.

I first met Mari when her father held a community forum in the theatre my mother ran. Her brother and I were both eight, she was six. George Stephens was running for Congress for the first time. He’d win this term, and his reelection bid six years later. Mom told me that Rachel, Marilla and Matthew’s older sister, was in charge for the day. She’d gone off somewhere to cry or write or space out. She did that a lot, from what Mari has told me. We stayed in the costume and prop shop. Matt pretended to be a Viking raider; Mari and I didn’t pretend to be scared of him. I

wouldn't see her again for eight years, when her brother was kicked out of Indian Springs School and enrolled in Ramsey High School, where he was in my homeroom. By then, Matt was a total druggie, but he remembered me almost immediately. I'm still not sure why he decided I was cool to include in his group (he would never admit it was a clique), but he did. He and I became really close. I started hanging out at the Stephens' house and fell in love with the Matt's little sister, Mari.

Now I have my arm around her waist. I'm not really holding her up, though. She keeps emphatically telling me that she doesn't need to be walked home. We're almost there when she decides to prove it.

"I'm going to walk a straight line now, so you'll see." She pulls away from me.

On her first step she stumbles.

"That only proves that I need to sit down for a while," she says. "We can sit on those steps over there."

"Those would be your neighbor's steps, Mari." I offer her my hand and she takes it. She uses the old stone wall on the other side to add balance. She lives in a Victorian townhouse on the Southside of Birmingham. There is an ancient, sprawling dogwood tree in her front yard, and a middle-aged weeping willow in the back. In the front garden, she planted ginger lilies because they liked the shade and come back every year. In the back flowerbed, she plants snapdragons and marigolds yearly, and tends the calla lilies the previous owner planted.

The previous owner was Rachel. She died when Marilla was twenty. Mari inherited everything from her big sister.

We sit down on the steps. All the houses are on a hill, so they all have steps leading up to the yards and walls around the front to—I don't know—prevent erosion. She lays her head on my shoulder.

“Could you stay? I'll drop you off at work tomorrow.”

“On the futon?”

She looks up at me and smiles. “You walked me home. I'll take the futon, you can have my bed.”

I laugh. “That's okay. I prefer the futon.”

“Damn skippy.”

Marilla and her brother and sister were all named after characters from a book their mother loved, *Anne of Green Gables*. I remember my step-sister reading it in the fifth grade. Rachel Anne, Matthew Gilbert, Marilla Diane. Their parents are nice people. Mr. Stephens now spends most of his time speaking at churches and prayer groups. He was involved in a financial scandal shortly after announcing he was running for a third term. Something about embezzlement and corporate lackeys who didn't shred enough paper work, as Mari put it. He won reelection, but resigned after two years. He went back to his law practice, was involved in another scandal (this time with a nubile young secretary out for revenge and a security video of him shredding the evidence), and retired. Now he talks about faith and finding his way back to the lord. He commands a modest fee for speaking, but Mrs. Stephens provides.

“Dad married for money, Mom married for kids,” Mari once told me. “Nona and Papa really helped us out for a few

And then my trust fund kicked in and I have Rachel's, so I

Give

really don't have much to worry about financially."

Throughout all of the Stephens' family trauma, Mrs. Stephens has baked. She is the eternally composed matriarch of her clan. She never really discusses her oldest daughter's illness, or her husband's philandering, or her son's addiction. She just bakes and goes to her Junior League meetings. I used to admire this, now I think it's sad. I've always liked Mrs. Stephens, though. She would feed me whenever I went over to their house. She never forgot my birthday, and baked me a cake every year until I was twenty-five. By then, she saw more of me than of her son. Mari said that their mom had hoped I could help "steer Matt into sobriety."

Mari stands up and stretches. She spins around, catches herself on the side of wall when she falters. She pulls me up.

"I wanna go home. We can still watch *Forensic Files* if we hurry. Court TV beckons me."

"Alrighty."

The best thing about Mari is her disdain for drama. Her father was a corrupt politician and then a corrupt lawyer; she doesn't talk about it. Her brother is hooked on oxy-cotin and crystal meth; she doesn't bring it up in everyday conversation. Her sister died of melanoma, but Mari acts like nothing is wrong. I'm used to trauma addicts, those people who debate whose life was worse. Mari seems to walk ten feet above the earth. She always has. Everything affects her though, I can tell. She doesn't return her father's phone calls and even uses her mother's maiden name when she fills in for the regular "Music through the Night" disk

jockey on WBHM. She buys her brother groceries on a weekly basis, but never gives him money. She cries when she's on the phone with him sometimes. I've gone to three interventions for Matt; Mari organized them all. She doesn't talk about Rachel.

Her sister died a month before Mari was scheduled to graduate from college. Rachel left everything to Mari, knowing that their brother would only use the money to get high and their parents didn't need any more. Mari got Rachel's trust fund and savings and investments. A week after graduation, Mari moved to Toronto.

"All the dubbing for anime is done in Canada," she told me. "It'll be much needed exposure. If I can get a job on a show like *Sailor Moon* or *Gundam*, even a bit part or two, my resume will shimmer."

I had to find out about her move over the phone. I was one of the few people she told personally—she sent a mass email to her family.

Marilla came back to Alabama after an uneventful year and a half in Canada. She called me from the airport and asked if I could help her move into her sister's old house. It had been used for storage while Mari was in Canada. I picked her up at the airport. She jumped up to hug me. I spun her around

"I had one casting agent tell me I didn't sound American enough," she laughed. "She said, 'Your accent doesn't sound right.' They were looking for a belle-type voice! I told her, 'Look. I'm from the southeastern United States. I think I can handle a southern accent.' I auditioned again in front of the voice director and he loved it. I was in four episodes, but that's the only work I

I have them on video if you want to see."



My mother died a year ago. Breast cancer. She had split with my stepfather and I was the only family she had. Marilla was the only family I had. Mari walked into the hospital in this black business suit and trench coat and high-heeled shoes that made her an inch taller than me. She walked in as if she was the only person who knew anything. She didn't just own the place, she presided over it. She walked up to the doctor and shouted, "Why are you standing here? Go heal someone!" Then she hugged me. She did most of the funeral arrangements. She was there for me.

We walk into her house, and she's still doing a sort of drunken ballet. Her movements are fluid but clumsy. Her dog, Sophie, rushes up to us. Sophie is an albino German shepherd, who was trained for police work but rejected due to her coat. She showed promise as a puppy and her owner had trained Sophie along with the other puppies in her litter. The trainer thought about keeping Sophie as a pet, but then she heard Mr. Stephens speak at her church. He was talking about the breakdown of urban society, and how he fears for his "surviving" daughter. She dropped Sophie off at the Stephens' house the next morning. For Mari, it was love at first sight.

"Hello baby," Mari coos.

I hang our coats on the coat stand and walk into the kitchen. She'll need something to dull the hangover she'll have. I head for the aspirin.

Rachel had been diagnosed with cancer at age 23. They said it was melanoma, skin cancer. They said she could treat it with

radiation therapy. Rachel refused.

I only knew Rachel for a few years. She and Mari were not close. The age difference between the sisters was eight years, making Rachel a de facto only child. She was what my grandmom used to call “high strung.” Mrs. Stephens called her panic-ridden.

“She’s like a fucking bunny sometimes. Or a deer in headlights,” Mari told me after they’d had an argument.

Rachel was an incredibly gentle person. She was a daddy’s girl. Mari inherited that position along with all the worldly assets. Rachel graduated top of her class at Indian Springs. She dropped out of Oberlin College in her senior year without giving a reason, after that she just stayed home a lot. She was diagnosed a short time later. Rachel worked sometimes as a phone solicitor for charity. She lived primarily off savings and her trust. Rachel died when she was twenty-eight years old.

I stayed at Mari and Matt’s house a lot during high school. When Rachel was home, she would stay in her room. Otherwise, she’d be balled up on the couch. She was very polite to me, but always looked like she’d just finished crying. Matt told me that she was breaking down. Mari told me she was faking it. She thought so, anyway.

I asked Mari how she felt about Rachel, right after she died.

“My sister was the kind of person who preferred quince to apples. She was the sweetest, most soft-spoken woman I’ve ever met. She was terrified of failure. And in the end, the first chance she had, she gave up. It was melanoma, that’s easy to treat. Did she want to treat it? No. It was the most passive aggressive suicide I’ve ever heard of,” she said, without looking me in the eyes. She avoided eye contact with anyone for a few days after the

funeral. “And she’ll always be hanging over my head. This possibility of her. What she didn’t accomplish, but could have. Everything was effortless for Rachel. She seemed to resent that, things being so easy. She couldn’t just be, but she couldn’t deal with being challenged. I just want to forget about her.”

I get two aspirin from the medicine cabinet. Mari has already sat down on the sofa, and now she’s calling for tonic water. I give her the aspirin. She rises up enough to kiss my forehead when I hand her the pills.

The most beautiful woman I know has beached herself on her bed. I help her take off her shoes. She slides under the duvet.

“The sheets for the fluton are—”

“—the closet under the stairs, I know.”

I’m shutting the door when she says, “Hey, Davy. That girl at the bar really liked you. I gave her your cell number, ’kay?”

“You just now remembered this?”

“It’ll be good for you. She does programming stuff too. Night-night.”

When I was a teenager, I was in love with Mari. I’m not anymore. She tries to get me to date other girls, but I haven’t met one I’ve liked yet. She needs someone to take care of her. I can do that.

Matt was supposed to meet us at the bar. I hate it when he pulls this shit. Everyone grieves in his or her own way, but this meeting had become a tradition. Mari had even flown back from Toronto to be with him on the first anniversary. And he skipped. It was five years tonight.



Mari walks into the living room just as I finish making the futon. She sits down.

“Can I sleep out here?” She has her duvet clutched around her like a cloak.

“Sure, why?”

Mari shrugs. “I just want one thing to go right tonight. And if I can’t have that, then at least I shouldn’t have to sleep alone.”

“Okay.”

The most beautiful woman I know sleeps in the fetal position. She encourages spooning. Her hair smells like really nice shampoo.



Snapshots

Michelle Downing

And one day
you look back at the places you've been--
at the black-and-white snapshots of our colorful life in time.
And you realize what you're made of.
You are made of those places,
of those people, of those experiences.
Sometimes,
the most amazing people
sweep into your life and make you think
so differently about the whole world.
And sometimes it is the consistency of those who do not sweep,
but merely tap, tap away at your door,
not wanting to change you, just wanting to be.
But the best are those who do neither.
They are there for you when you need them
but fade into the shadows of an alley
when they see you need your own
space and identity.
They build you up and challenge you
to become a better version of you,
but then back down so you can walk the path of life
on your own.
Yet, all of those people have a place in your life.
They are each a different color,
adding their hue and value to your palette.
Yet, combined, you become light, a white light built of all those
experiences.
And you realize that you, yourself, are a snapshot of life.

Tuesday's Words

Elizabeth Frye

scramble.

an omelet of protein-rich image
but the shells fall in
and the tomatoes are rotting soft
with brown bruises.
you will not eat breakfast today.

write.

with fingernail clippings,
polished streaked,
and shreds of notebook paper
hiding in the maze of carpet.
the shampoo bottle sags,
completely empty
(only the smell of Hawaiian coconuts leaks out).

admit.

you are rotting soft,
sulking because you're not thirteen
and can't write about love anymore,
while the cracking of knuckles
and drumming of keys
reverberates like the chitchat
of women working in dentists' offices.

open.

your closing eyelids,

tired from last night's drive to Montgomery
with him
to laugh at the Ten Commandments,
trapped under the blanched skin of the judicial building.
you exchanged
1...2...3...4
hours of sleep
to wonder which was his abandoned bedroom
when the car ambled past
the brown clone of a house
sighing under the banner
of broken blue sky,
tattered white stars,
and uniform rows of blood and bone.

wonder.

if you know what America is anymore,
if you can tell a difference
between the 18-wheelers that tear down the interstate,
pushing their frightening tons of metal loneliness
upon your tiny, marshmallow car
and the homeless man tottering between streetlights,
his clothes soaked with cheap red wine
that you too have bought at late-night gas stations.

realize.

that you're stuck
writing about nothing
looking for metaphor
in the breaths of too loudly ticking watches
and the artificial softness of waiting room chairs
every live-wired neuron in your body
begging for someone to call your name.

Winn-Dixie Roses

Allison Shafer Brown

I decided to go to my mother's. This was the thing to do since it was Mother's Day. I bought her a sappy card and a bouquet of cheap flower from Winn-Dixie. It's a short drive to her house, but she lives on a pretty street lined with oak trees on either side. I arrived at her house about three o'clock, and since she was expecting me, the door was open. The sun had already sunk low enough that the trees cast shadows on the sidewalk. The sidewalk is lined with pink and white azaleas. The gardener had recently been there so the bushes were perfectly pruned. He had also left a few blossoms floating in the birdbath. My mother usually keeps her house fairly neat, but not today. There were old magazines strewn all over the hard wood floors. Mostly *Southern Living*. The red velvet curtains had been pulled from the bay window, and the house smelled like burnt toast.

When my brother and I were small my mother would spend all day cleaning. If we got in trouble, which was often, she would make us wash all the baseboards in the house or clean the oven. She would think of something we hated the most and make us do it. She would punish us for the strangest things. I was always on

restriction for something. One time, I wore a dress to school that Mother thought was ugly. It wasn't inappropriate, just ugly, and she grounded me for a week.

"Mother?" I called from the formal living room. I walked in toward her bedroom at the back of the house. I found her in the bathroom pacing on the white marble floor. She had pulled her red curly hair from her bun. She mumbled and scratched at her face.

Daddy died six years ago in a plane crash. He had gone to New York in a private plane with two of his business partners. They hit some rough weather and the plane went down in rural Georgia. By the time the police arrived they were already dead. Mother hasn't been the same since Daddy died. When he was alive they would go on a "date" once a week. He would bring her flowers or candy, and they would go to a movie or nice restaurant. Sometimes at night I could hear them talking and laughing. They were the picture of a perfect couple.

Now, she spends her good days at Junior League meetings and the Heart Guild. She found any kind of philanthropic venture an escape from the loneliness of widowhood. On her bad days she won't get out of bed. She won't read, listen to the radio or watch *Days of Our Lives*. She just lies around and cries. She mumbles to

herself and rolls back and forth in the bed. There is no in-between; she is either ready to die or ready to save the world. These inconsistencies in her behavior won't allow her to hold an office in her philanthropic organizations or a regular job. My brother and I try to help her as best we can, but she can be so aggravating. Once we tried to get her to go to the doctor about her problems, but she just laughed. "I'm grieving," she said. "This is how I deal with loss."

I was always a daddy's girl. Mother and I had a horrible relationship. We never talked the way my friends did with their mothers. She was always more interested in my brother. She only came to one dance recital in ten years of dance; Daddy never missed one. When I was in high school we would get in at least one fight every day. I was eighteen when Daddy died and three days after the funeral I left home. Since I moved away, Mother and I get along better.

Mother has always been odd, but she is acting stranger than normal today. I've never seen her pace like this before. She is rocking and mumbling unintelligibly. Usually when she is thinking about Daddy, and sad, she just sleeps it off.

"Mother, did you knock down the curtains and mess up the den like that?" There's no answer, just more rocking, pacing, and

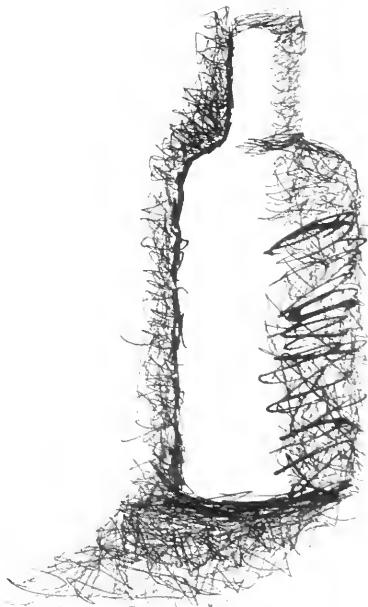
scratching. “Momma, are you alright? What can I do to help?” Still no answer. “Momma!” This time I grabbed her arm to get her attention and to keep her from pacing. She flung her arms open and knocked me to the ground. When I hit my head hard on the great bathtub in the corner of the room, she screamed and ran back into the den. She ran from room to room and knocked over furniture. She broke a piece of Granny’s china that hung on the wall outside the spare room.

The next thing I knew, she was in the kitchen throwing dishes out of cabinets. Then she found some pills in the pantry by the fridge. I didn’t know what they were, so I wrestled them out of her hands before she could take any. I tried to pin her down, I thought that she might calm down if she couldn’t move, but she got away from me. Then she fumbled at the knife drawer. Her hands were shaking, so it was hard for her to open. I shoved her away from the drawer and she fell. Then she got up and ran to the powder room. I needed help, but my brother was visiting his in-laws in Indiana and I couldn’t call him. I heard her break something in the powder room, so I called 911.

Stunted Rise

Christin Buttel

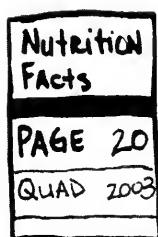
The long summer days were no longer resolute
Autumn creeps in with dry, wrangled fingers
The cold wind inflicts a sting of reality and
We no longer run from the heat; we seek the warmth
No more are the humid days, the sultry tone
Wild fun- the bad things that were good choices
Those hot, crazy escape from the phlegmatic cogs of life
No more dirty apartments and crystal clear highs
So long to early drinking in smoke-filled hideouts
We didn't need windows.
Good-bye to sin that smelled of smoke, sweat and skin
I feel fall rushing in with gnarled fingers.



The American Family

Benjamin Uel Marsh

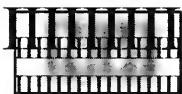
Staring at his mother.
reading the story of struggle,
in her wrinkles.
then he asks the questions,
once dramatized by Mr. Shakur.
“where my daddy at, momma why we live so poor”
He continues with.
What are your tears looking for.
While they make reconnaissance,
over her face.
She didn’t respond.
She felt like failure to her son.
But he sees only two failures in his life.
His two forgotten Fathers.
She depends on one more than the other.
But to him they’re both worthless.
When others ask.
Where?
He says,
My father’s dead.
Even though he’s not,
but dead to him.
How?
He got shot.
So he lives a lie,
waiting for the bastard to die.
In order to collect a concrete memory of how not to be.
Of how not to be, like sorry old me.
He lives a lie but I live a truth.
Heard you have a son?
He died in his youth.



How?
He got shot.
And I held the gun.
From my bullets of neglect,
impossible to run.
Now he's dead to me.
For death is not only the end of life,
but also the end of relationship.



SCENE MISSING



Hospital 9

Jillian Greer

I almost died once. Amid the mechanical beeps, floating faces, and needles, I almost died and never knew it. As a matter of fact, I was maybe fourteen before this revelation hit me—that when I was nine, there was a reason why the pulse meter continuously emitted the annoyingly-loud warnings and a reason why I had tubes up my nose. And by the time I was fourteen, this epiphany was my prized possession. I was, perhaps, a little melodramatic as I hit adolescence; so to realize that I almost really did “go gentle into that good night” actually pleased me immensely, and soon it became a great conversation starter. Of course, I’d say things nonchalantly as if I had met Death face-to-face and won (pity me; honor me; and do me homage). Obviously, when I was fourteen, the facts weren’t quite straight in my head. Even today, I still cannot grasp the full implications of my hospital stay, but that has a lot to do with the fact that as a child, I was blissfully ignorant of adult technicalities like pulse rates slipping and heart beats slowing. When I was in the hospital on the days around Thanksgiving, my only fears were the needles of IV’s and syringes. These days, I have no scars, no marks, nor any other physical reminders of my three-day hospital stay except for a red and brown pillow I keep on my bed.

I can’t breathe.

I can hear from my room Dad’s voice mingling with Mr. Jeff’s voice in the living room. It’s hard not to hear other people’s conversations in the house since it’s so small—there are six of us

living in a three-bedroom house. I don't want my dad to see me crawling or even awake because I'm afraid he will yell at me, so I try to stay behind furniture and slink my way towards my parents' bedroom while Mr. Jeff from next-door talks with my dad casually about life. Mom's at work, so she can't make everything better for me. I hope that maybe a little of her is left in her room, and so it is there I attempt to crawl to undetected. I'm afraid Dad will see me and tell me how dumb I am being. I've had asthma attacks before, and they've all gone away. All I need right now is some comfort left by my mom to make me feel better. The red and brown pillow lying by Mom's side of the bed is so warm-colored and soft that I decide that it can be the proper lifesaver. I curl up and try to sleep, but I can hardly breathe. I relive the fading day in my head to pass the time as Dad chats in the next room.

I hate substitute teachers because they refuse to understand. They believe that if they reward you with a recess outside with the swings and slides and seesaws that you ought to be grateful. I am grateful, but my chest is tight. I shouldn't be playing, and I shouldn't be running. I try to tell my substitute teacher, but she stares at me blankly and tells me to play anyway. I do what I am told because adults know best.

In the other room, I can hear Dad and Mr. Jeff wrapping up their conversation, and I am glad. By now, I don't care if Dad finds me, but I just don't want Mr. Jeff to see me like this. I can already see my father's reaction to seeing me before he even steps into his room: the double-take at his child lying in the fetal position on the floor and his instant look of concern blending into confusion. I don't

have to open my eyes to witness it. I know he can hear my rattling breath as he approaches, and his only question is whether I've taken my inhaler. I nod gratefully, so he, a practical man, rushes to get his new book on asthma to figure out what to do next. While he paces the room, I fall in and out of sleep, and eventually Mom arrives home from work. It must be late into the night, then. After my parents swap some low-toned concerns, my mom steps into her element. She's dealt with all of my attacks, since my dad is usually the one at work, and she knows all the right things to do. Tonight, however, nothing is working. I try hard to hide it; I don't want to go to the hospital.

We've been through this before, Mom and I. Within five minutes of my parents deciding it's time to go to the hospital, my Ronald McDonald nightgown is cloaked by my heavy coat and my feet have been shoed. I always feel silly dressed like this, like I ought to get fully dressed since people will see me. The temperature outside as I walk to the car is cold, but there's a twist to it, a feeling like it's those hours when no one ought to be awake. The world is dead outside; no one else is driving, and the only movement I notice is the streetlights flashing on Mom and me as we drive silently by. Everything is in black and white like a funny, old movie, and the blue bucket at my feet pulsates in shades of gray with the passing lights. Every time I end up on the road to the hospital, I insist that I don't need the bucket, but by the time I reach the ER ("What does 'ER' mean?" I ask but never remember the answer), the bottom of the bucket is covered with whatever I ate before. I haven't started throwing up yet, and as the lights make shadows play in the car, I wait for Mom's question: "Are you sure you need to go to the hospital? You know the nurses give shots, right?" Sometimes I

decide that maybe I don't need to go to the hospital after all, and we head back home, but Mom doesn't ask me this time. The silence scares me the way I'm scared when I've done something bad and am waiting in my room for Dad to get off of work to punish me. Before I have a chance to form doubts about going to the hospital, my stomach twists. I guess I needed the bucket after all.

Somehow I've gone from the car seat to a hospital bed that is not really a bed but a papered, padded, rolling tabletop. Through a collage of faces whose focus moves from one white-clothed person to another, someone hands me a kidney bean-shaped, metal thing, and I know it can't possibly hold everything that I'm about to lose and am losing. In a brief pause in my vomiting, the many faces insist that I try to drink a little 7-Up. Within seconds, the 7-Up is back in the kidney tray with a little extra bonus. At some point I think that if I keep trying to throw up with nothing coming up that surely I'll eventually get something interesting like blood or a lung like in one of those scary stories I've read that isn't scary. But now that I'm actually coughing and lunging, I wonder if I really will lose something important; so I cry.

Somehow I'm not throwing up anymore, and I'm in a new, blue room hooked up to the cloud. I love the cloud (a "nebulizer" I think is the word from the nurses floating around me) because as soon as I put the mouthpiece in, my breath sounds like Darth Vader, and it always makes me feel better. In the midst of my haze, a nurse walks in carrying a rubbery tube, a bag, and a needle. This is new—why is she grabbing my hand? I look around wildly for my mother so she can stop the nurse who is now tying the rubber ribbon around my wrist in a tight band. As Mom hugs me, I know what's coming—a new shot just like she warned me. I'm sorry I

came to the hospital. I try to tell Mom I'm sorry, but the tears are choking me up as the Nazi nurse inserts the longest needle I've ever seen into my hand but doesn't inject anything or take the needle out. All she does is lie and say that I'm the bravest kid she's ever met. Sure. I'm attached to a bag now, and I try to forget it by floating back to the cloud. Mom is comforting me, I think, but I can't tell because everything is fading in and out. I don't know how long I've been here, and where is here? "The Intensive Care Unit," my mom tells me. Wow. Someone could have a pipe through his stomach, and I'm here for asthma. This amuses me, and I feel important.

My cloud is gone, but I'm in a real bed now in a real hospital room. This room seems better than the ICU room anyway because I can make my bed move with a remote, and I have a TV with a real VCR. I've never had a VCR before. People aren't everywhere either; only Mom is with me, and we are both exhausted. I move in and out of consciousness.

My first day here is filled with mini-movies, some short and some long. I don't remember much. Familiar and unfamiliar faces float around—my family, my doctor, nurses with pills and blood tests, nurses with papers asking me questions, and my grandparents.

I have to go pee but can't get out of bed. To my immense embarrassment, I have to cry out to the intercom like a baby, and after what seems like an eternity, a nurse comes in with a kidney tray. I am humiliated, but too tired to argue.

My two brothers and my sister have come to visit me. To my bewilderment, my oldest brother David is crying. I thought they'd all be thrilled to see all of the cool things I have—my ID bracelet, the funny tube in my nose, my moveable bed, and my

Vingt-sept

TV—but David cries. Today is his birthday.

Someone is screaming next door. A little kid smaller than me, I think. Maybe he's getting an IV (that's what Dad says I have) too.

It smells funny here. The food's tasteless. My pulse-rate monitor is always going off. I have to pee. I want to go home.

I am covered in blood and very confused. My dad is standing in the corner waiting, but for what I don't know. My hands, my Ronald McDonald, my face are all bloody but not slick; the blood's dry. What is going on? As I examine myself for a wound, my eyes catch a loose tube, a tube that should be in my left hand. No, I don't want to do this again; I don't want another IV. I plead with Dad not to call the nurses, and I'm starting to get hysterical. "I've already called them," he says apologetically and begins to pace the room. He tells me as if I should already know that I ripped out the IV. How could that be? He tells me that an alarm went off, and I jumped out of bed and ripped out the IV. Why don't I remember? And the footsteps—I can hear the nurse coming. This isn't fair. I try to negotiate with the nurse, but only succeed in telling her where to put the needle. I tell her to put it in my hand again because I don't remember it hurting so bad the first time. After a few minutes of her painful prodding and my furious tears, the nurse decides to go for the tender part on the opposite side of my arm from the elbow. I am screaming like the kid down the hall, and my Dad is pacing faster, looking desperately for a way to comfort me. The nurse tells me how brave I am (as if I hadn't heard that line before) as she tapes my punctured arm securely to a splint. My dad rushes out to smoke a cigarette, and I fade out again.

Balloons are beginning to take over my bed. At this rate, I feel like if they were tied to me instead of the bed rail, that I'd float away. When I woke up this morning in a new outfit (fully cleansed after the IV incident), a new load of balloons came in from my grandparents in Georgia. One balloon is a clown, which did not bother me until I dreamed of evil clowns after I watched *Pee Wee's Big Top Adventure* from my hospital bed. I haven't slept well because every half hour, I'm awakened by nurses or doctors to be subjected to pills and shots that leave bruises. The pills I'm supposed to take are as big as half of my thumb, and I can't swallow them. The nurse opens the pills and puts the little pellets on a gummy orange slice for me to eat. I don't think I'll ever eat gummy orange slices again. I'm beginning to really despise nurses, too. My mom, as she brushes my hair, jokes on me, calling me a human pincushion.

During my second day in the hospital, I mostly sleep between the frequent nurse visits. My grandparents who live in town have come to visit me. I'm happy to see them, but I'm not sure of what I'm saying. I haven't been able to think well. All of a sudden, my dad goes pale and interrupts my babbling. "She's talking about a baby *doll*—her mom has a baby doll, not a baby," he tells my grandfather rapidly. Surely I didn't just tell Grandma and Grandpa Mom's secret. I hope not. Grandfather, a man tight with his money as are most men who lived the Great Depression, gets angry every time he finds out. What else have I been saying without knowing it?

The doctor comes with a new test. He has a tube with a small ball in it. He wants me to blow in a mouthpiece as hard as I can to see how high I can make the ball go according to some measurements on the side of the tube. I can't get the ball to move

above zero. I try over and over as hard as I can, thinking surely I can make the ball move. It never does. To prove that the tube works, my doctor demonstrates for me. His breath causes the ball to shoot to the top of the tube in a sudden burst. I am very, very frustrated.

Movies aren't as wonderful as before. They don't make up for the fact that I'm basically plugged into a wall, that I can't pee on my own, and that I can't walk. I don't even get real food like the people down the hall who got turkey. I heard that everyone would get turkey tonight as a treat. I get Jell-O and a Popsicle again. Mom turns *Barnum and Bailey's Three Ring Circus* on TV to get my mind off of my disappointment, and I eventually fall asleep.

I am getting better, the doctor tells me. I am trying to will my pulse rate above eighty because he told me last night that if I stay above eighty that I could go home. When he visits me this morning, I am scared that he'll tell me that my pulse rate slipped while I was asleep. "We'll see this afternoon," he says. I go back to willing my pulse above eighty after I try unsuccessfully to make the ball go above zero in the tube again.

I'm going home! The doctor says I can leave now and even takes off my pulse meter and nose tube. The Nazi nurse is back to take out my IV, but I don't want her to. By now the needle must have bonded to my skin and become part of me. Taking it out should be worse than ripping off a Band-Aid. As usual, the nurse ignores my pleas and begins to unstrap my splint. To make up for my tears, she allows me to climb out of my bed for the first time and sit next to her. She stops in the middle of telling me how it won't hurt to take out the IV to tell me that the needle is already out.

Maybe she isn't a Nazi. And this is my final act of victory: I use the

toilet on my own. The bathroom smells bad, though. Someone's been leaving my bedpan in the bathroom, and I feel bad and mostly embarrassed for my family who had to endure that smell for the last three days.

At church two days after my release from bondage, I'm right back at Sunday school. Mr. Becker, my teacher, asks me how I enjoyed my Thanksgiving break, to which I reply as lightly as I can that I was in the hospital. Isn't it funny how people's color drains? I wish my arm still couldn't move because of the splint so that I could get a greater effect, but I still keep my ID bracelet on for proof. This is great.



Missing

Kathryn Gilmer

They say we take everything for granted.
They say we have more than we deserve.
I try to think of all I do have;
but I only see what I don't.
And then I start to think...

What if I couldn't see?
Look upon the faces of those I love?
Never again to see a sunrise
or the beauty of blue skies above.
The colors of a rainbow
and the color of your eyes,
all lost, gone,
and fading away as the days pass by.
But then...

What if I couldn't hear?
How could I live without hearing your voice, your words?
The sound of music drifting away,
along with the songs of the birds.
The whirr of the washing machine.
The soft tic-toc of the clock as time creeps by.
The sound of children laughing.
All gone in the blink of an eye.
And what if...

What if I couldn't feel?
What if I couldn't touch your face?
The soft feel of a dog's fur,
the homespun texture of a swatch of lace.
The slide of cotton against my skin.

The feel of this pen in my hand.
The feel of the ocean as it washes over me,
the feel of my toes digging into the sand.

Which of these things would I miss the most?
I cannot say.

I have pondered this question on countless occasions.
It always sits in the back of my mind.
But then I wonder...

What if I couldn't love?
If I couldn't appreciate the wonder of you to the fullest?
If my mind were filled with selfish things,
and I let the memory of you and me decay and rust?
If I couldn't love your humor,
or the sparkle in your eye?
If I didn't care if you got sick?
If I didn't care if you died?

What if you died and I emerged from my paralysis?
What if I suddenly cared, but you were already gone?
What if I were too late?
What if there was something I could have done?

I think of all these things,
and this possibility haunts me like a ghost.
I could live without my sight, hearing, feeling.
You, I'd miss the most.

thirty three

Reflections on Mildred Allen's Recital

D. B. Irwin

Grace garnered through endurance
transcends the gilded gaiety of youth.
An instrument tuned with purpose, skill and care,
A body held in rigid discipline, caught simultaneous
in the anxiety of anticipation and
the breathless thrill of accomplishment fulfilled,
releases a voice clear of purpose, melodious, succinct,
falling perfectly into place amid the minds and motions of a
1000-year struggle between beauty and form.



The Packashaw Diner (excerpted from the novel)

Derek Arnold

At 5:00 a.m., Jack's alarm went off, but he was already up and in the shower. From the bathroom, he heard the slow methodical beep getting louder and louder until it sounded as if the alarm was taking a shower with him. Many people he knew hated the sound of alarm clocks, but alarms did not bother him. Alarm or no alarm, 5:00 a.m. to 5:30 a.m. was the quietest part of his day, and he soaked up the calmness of the pre-dawn morning.

By the end of his shower, Jack felt more awake, but his eyelids still drooped heavily downward as he picked up his razor to begin his daily battle against the stubble growing on his face. After all these years of shaving, he still drew blood on a regular basis. He often thought of himself as a brave soldier as he dragged the blade across his face. The foggy steam of the bathroom, the booming intrusive sound of the alarm clock and the sharp blade of the razor were the closest resemblance to war he had ever experienced.

Instead of war, he faced the town of Packashaw, NC fourteen hours a day, six days a week. That was his job. He was the only cook in the only diner in town. But flipping hotcakes and hamburgers was not his only role at the diner. He was also the manager and the owner. He had inherited the diner when his parents died in a hot air balloon accident the summer after his senior year in high school. Although it was a tragic time in his life, he made the decision to retain ownership of the diner. He felt connected to the place. He had grown up there. So, instead of selling the diner and going off to college with the rest of his friends, he decided to

stay in Packashaw and run the diner the way his mom and dad had done for so many years.

He looked in the mirror when he was done shaving and examined his face. As he did so, he thought about how the complaints at the diner had increased in number recently. Most of the time he felt the complaints were unwarranted, but he understood, better than anyone else, the mood swings of the town. He knew everyone in town was on edge due to the phantom presence of Roger Stone, a reporter for the big newspaper out the capitol city of Raleigh. Stone was covering the local response to the state legislature's attempts to close the county courthouse in Packashaw and build a new one in the neighboring city of Hadleyville. Stone made his opinion on the issue quite clear in his first article. He favored moving the courthouse to Hadleyville and spent a considerable amount of the article focusing on, as he put it, "the immensely strong arguments from the citizens of Hadleyville." All week he had heard about the article, entitled, "The Court House Move," and Roger Stone's detestable bias. He doubted the conversations in the diner would be any different today.

He shook his head as he thought about the peculiarity of the situation. No one had ever seen Roger Stone, and yet this phantom journalist was causing more of an uproar in town than the day the head football coach had been questioned about giving drugs to his athletes. When controversial issues like the courthouse sparked inescapable chatter in the diner, he usually withheld his personal opinion. He considered neutrality better for business.

As the steam cleared from the mirror, he discovered a few spots of brown hair he had missed shaving under his jaw line, but he did not care, he'd be sure to get those spots the next time he

shaved and he moved onto brushing his teeth. He was obsessive about oral hygiene. Somehow, a friendly smile with clean white teeth from the cook had a way of putting customers at ease about the food they were about to eat, so he religiously brushed his teeth for five minutes every morning.

After his five minutes were up, with one huge splash of water from his cupped hands, he rinsed off the remaining shaving cream, a few drops of blood, and toothpaste from his face. He took one final look at his face, and knowing there was not anything else he could do to change his appearance, he headed into the bedroom to get dressed.

In his room, the green digital numbers on his alarm clock read 5:15. The alarm had automatically turned itself off a few minutes ago and silence permeated the darkness of the room. After seventeen years of the same schedule, he did not really need an alarm clock, but hearing the alarm when he was in the shower was just as much a part of his ritual morning routine as shaving and brushing his teeth. In the dark, he picked out a pair of jeans from his closet and a grey t-shirt and put them on.

From his bedroom, he went to the kitchen to prepare the first meal of the day, breakfast for his golden retriever Shadow. Jack whistled and then listened to hear Shadow climb off the couch in the living room. She always made a thud as her back paws hit the ground. This morning was no different from the previous mornings and after hearing her topple off the couch, he opened a can of Alpo dog food and emptied it into a bowl. Shadow appeared at the entrance to the kitchen, just as Jack was putting the bowl on the floor. “Morning,” he said kneeling down to rub Shadow’s ears. In her older age, Shadow had become less and less of a morning dog.

but she still got up everyday to see Jack before he left for work. She wagged her tail, sniffed the food, licked his arm, and then turned around and moseyed back toward the abyss of the living room to sleep the rest of the morning. “Have a good day old girl,” he said as she disappeared around the corner.

With his morning routine nearly complete and the clock in the kitchen pushing 5:23, he slipped on a pair of grease spattered Nike running shoes and left the house out the back door, pausing briefly to unlatch the pet door so Shadow could go out when she got up for the day. On good weather days, like today, he walked the two blocks between his house and the diner. At the end of his driveway, he paused to breathe in a deep breath of fresh air. Although it was still warm during the days, the morning air was beginning to show the first signs that fall was fast approaching. The remnants of the summer humidity were slipping away like the last drops from a coffee pot and soon, he would have to start wearing his jacket on his morning commute. He walked two blocks down his tree-lined street until it intersected with Main Street downtown, then turned left, walked past Sutton’s Pharmacy and Brumbell’s Antique Shop, and then stopped outside the Packashaw Diner to find his key.

Sutton’s, Brumbell’s, and the diner comprised one block downtown and the diner was on the corner of the town square. Diagonally across from the diner was the newly infamous county courthouse. The Handy Hardware Store and the law office of Mr. Longman occupied the other two corners of the town square. Jack looked up at the courthouse as he struggled to get his keys out of his pocket. The courthouse appeared to tower majestically over the town square, but Jack knew that the shadows cast on its stone

walls by the street lights made the building look bigger than it actually was. Other than the streetlights, the neon coffee cup in the window of the diner was the only other light on downtown. After flipping through several keys, he found the key to the diner and opened the door. Once inside, he turned on the lights and flipped the sign in the window so that it read “OPEN”. Saturday, September 15th had officially begun in Packashaw.

“Good morning Jack. How are you?” Gracie, Packashaw’s favorite waitress, said as the bell over the door signaled her entrance.

“I’m fine,” Jack said. “How are you?”

“Well, have I got a story for you. You will never believe what I ran into yesterday on my way home from work and I swear this is as true as the good Lord’s book itself. Right on there on the corner, right outside the diner, I bumped into this woman who was just sitting there on the curb staring at the courthouse. She had one of them fancy, in your lap, computers and I swear the screen was as blank as her expression. But, as I was saying, I started to trip over her when I noticed she was just sitting there and she did not say a word to me, not one darn word- not even when my black little shoe nailed her right in the hip and my knee crushed her earring so hard against her head that I thought surely she would bleed. Thank goodness she didn’t bleed though, you know how I can’t stand the sight of blood. So I ask her if she’s all right, if I can take her home and bandage her up or something, but she insists that she’s fine. I thought it strange at the time that I didn’t recognize her and that she didn’t mention her name, but that’s what got me thinking. Jack.” Gracie said pausing dramatically to make sure he was paying

attention. "I think Roger Stone is a woman, but not just any woman, I think Roger Stone might be that woman. I thought about it all night and it makes perfect sense. If Roger Stone is a woman, she could parade around town with her fancy computer, and ask questions, and spy on us, and no one would even suspect she was Roger Stone, the man, writing all those mean and nasty things about our town trying to get our courthouse moved. She is so conniving, just thinking about her scheme makes me shiver."

At the end of her story, Jack removed the fifty strips of bacon he had frying on the grill without even looking down to see if they were finished. He wasn't quite sure how she did it, but Gracie could tell any story she knew in the time it took to cook a piece of bacon. In all the years he'd been working with Gracie, her sensational morning theories had never burned the bacon.



Letter to Memaw

Jeremy Johnson

Dear Memaw,

I am here on an island called Dominica,
where this morning our schooner was dwarfed
by a cruise ship, a city floating on the ocean,
as the grease-black harbor waters surrounded us,
and pulled us toward that concrete pier.

In the city it's dirty—a desert
in an oasis. Squat little shacks
line the trash-filled streets, desolate of life
yet crowded with people, while bars, restaurants,
and more bars all serve us their finest.

Music rolls off the tongues of street performers,
with their Reggae beats and jive-filled phrases
mixing and mingling in the salty air, yet creating
a flawless pandemonium.

You would be perfect here, bartering
and dealing for a twenty-five cent mango
among farmers, bakers, and fishermen,
all showing their teeth—white sheets
on a mahogany bed.

A four foot concrete wall runs around the city,
a prison fence separating the wrong from the right
and a small piece of KFC bag floats up to the wall
but backs down and scurries into town.

Outside this wall lies a paradise,
the shores virgin and unrefined,

forests so thick the wind can't get through,
reminding me of how we used to get up at five
and take those long walks through the woods
down to the river, trying to find nothing
but finding everything in each other.

The roads are narrow, curving upwards forever,
dancing in the clouds, a fruitless quest
to reach Heaven, as the ocean stretches outward
broken only by the fussing waves.

I could lose myself in these towering mountains
bearded in clouds, or disappear
behind a fleeing wind, or hide
among the tropical brush forever.
But then I'd never see you again,
or laugh with you, or cry with you,
and that is what brings me home,
you.
Love Always, Jeremy.

Perspective of a Woman in a Wheelchair

Stewart Vann

Hair perfect, mother always said to project an attitude of success.
I really look nice today.
Traded two legs for four wheels.
Up by two.

Going to the village today, I'll probably get a book.
Dale would be proud of me. (Husband, dead from crash that took
legs from woman)
Today I will not miss him.
Those women will love this blouse, the village women.

The bustle is overwhelming, (smile)
Commerce at its peak,
Oh, mercy, here they come,
They're walking out the door of the shop,

The women, oh, let me fix my hair,
They are turning my way,
They are waving, at me, and smiling,
Oh, how nice, "Hello, I-"

They, aren't waving at me,
I must try and look natural. My wheels won't turn.
A smirk, (sad face, tear)
They are walking to their friend behind me.

It would be nice to see a friend,
I would like to hug Dale,
I would like to trade back,
I think I'm stuck in the gutter....

"Adolf Hitler Kissing a Nurse in Times Square"

Post marked ballerinas with bony backs,
Fragile faces, and empty eyes tell a story;
Storytelling moment caught;
Caught in careful hands, opened gently,
red slowly, reread, tucked away a tear
stained treasure.

Brow straining, fists clenching, mouth quivering,
heart swelling rapidly sinking its ship;
Sunken ship discovered, after adaptation
almost unrecognizable, while treasure
surfaced into careful hands that
opened gently not quite like the first time.

-Laurin Miller
for tee fore

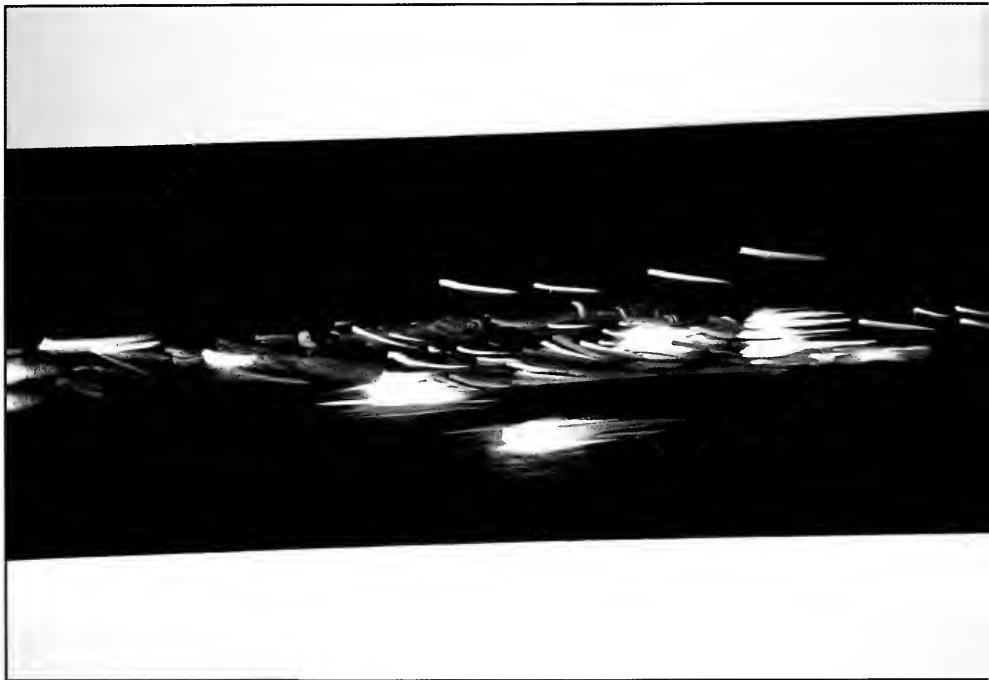
You guys wanna see some art?

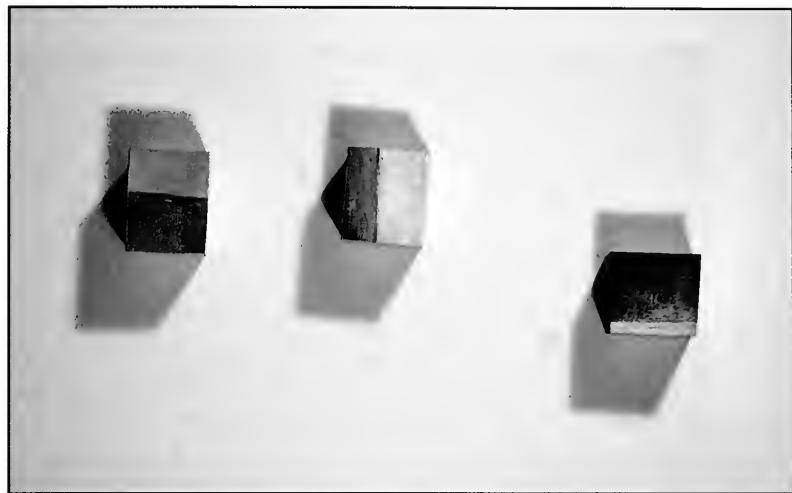
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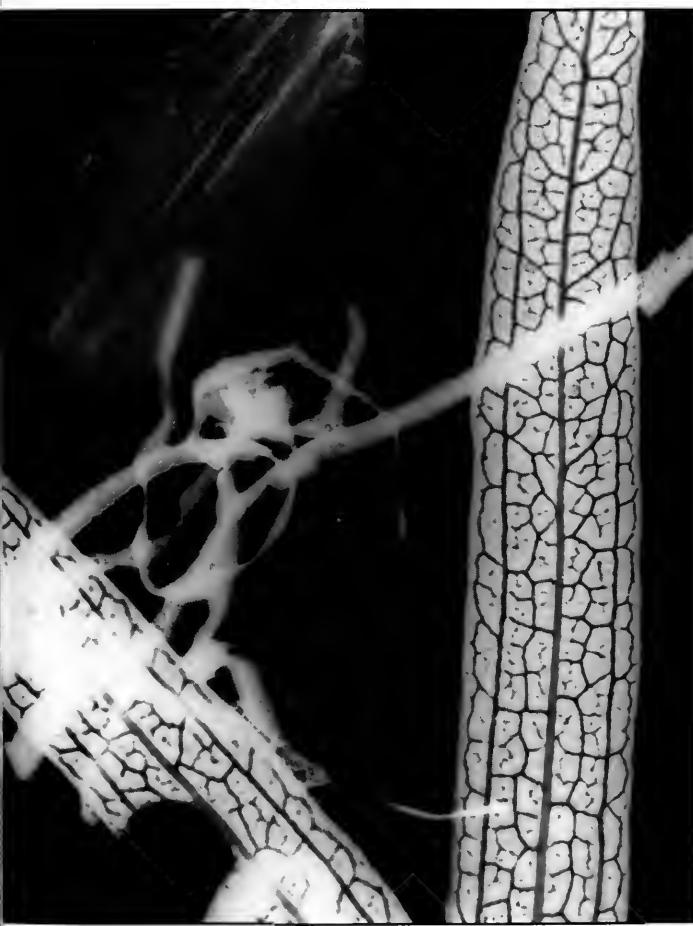
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"It Seems Better Now Than It Did Then," Sarah Roberts



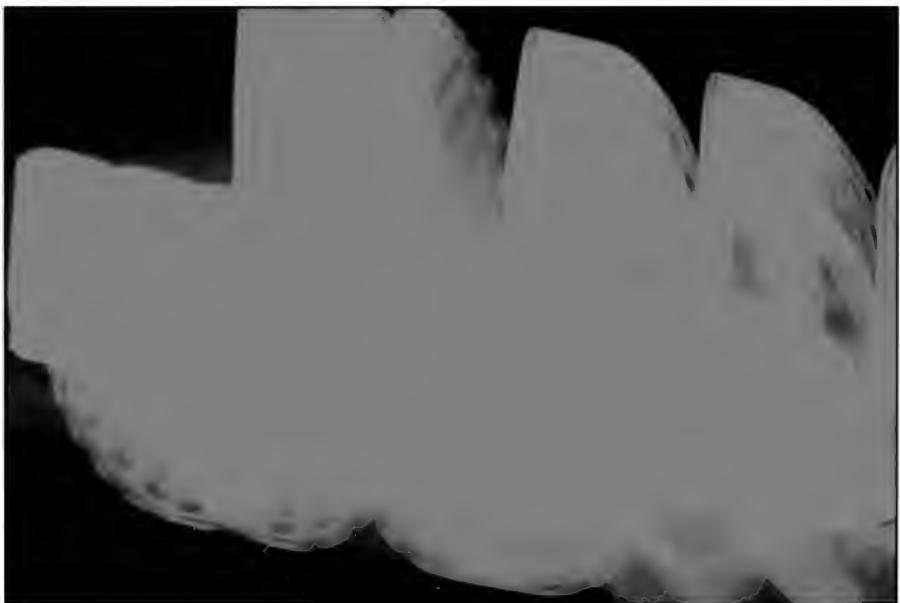


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No Title, Jeff Grove

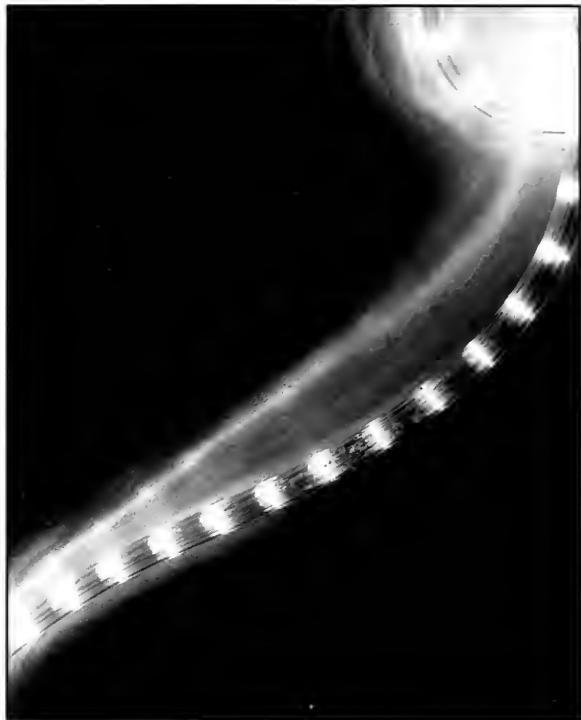
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“WBRC I and II,” Charles Horn



No Title, Rachel Higgins



No Title, Jeff Grove



No Title, Sarah Roberts



No Title, Rachel Higgins

“Window Series I and II,” Rachel Higgins



“Not Now Sarah,” Sarah Roberts



Denouement

Alex Scokel

Jaime wasn't sure why her parents had made her leave the kitchen as they cleaned up the trays topped with brie, grapes, and pimento cheese sandwiches. She told them she wanted to help, but they silenced her with a mean look and Dad led her by the hand from the kitchen into Uncle James's living room. He sat her down on a sofa and returned to the kitchen. Though the sofa had appeared stiff and uncomfortable to Jaime, the orange cushions were surprisingly soft. They smelled faintly of a sweet scent Jaime couldn't identify. The back and arms of the sofa were made of wood. They were pretty. The colors on the polished wood armrests twirled together and split again, streaming down the sofa and collecting in a bulb on the carpet. It reminded Jaime of the backs of the pews at church, only shinier.

Jaime winced as her parents began speaking loudly at each other again. She could hear them through the door. It worried Jaime. This was usual at home. At home Jaime could hide in her room or escape outside. She could deal with it. But she didn't know what to do at Uncle James's house. Her parents had never argued away from home before. Jaime was supposed to be on her best behavior, and Dad wouldn't want her to leave the couch. So she tried to ignore them, and focused on a statue of a fat Asian man in a robe that was sitting on the end table. It was metal, or she thought it was. It was the color of a penny all over, except for a necklace of beads around his neck. The beads were like red marbles, all swirls inside. Two reds swirling together. They

reminded Jaime of blood. They were blood marbles, made of the blood from a small scrape mixed with the darker blood in the tubes at a doctor's office. Jaime rubbed her finger as she thought about the doctor standing over her, the little blue piece of plastic ready to clamp down into her skin. Mom was there then, holding Jaime's hand.

"It's just a little bite," Mom had whispered. "It barely breaks the skin."

The yelling got louder, and Jaime could no longer force it out of her head. Dad shouted a word that Jaime had never heard before, and then there was silence. But it was only a temporary reprieve, and by the time Jaime had worked up the courage to get off of the sofa, the yelling had begun again. Jaime didn't much think that this was acceptable behavior. Fighting in the home is one thing; at a funeral was quite another. If *she* was the parent, she would have launched into the "This isn't the time, nor the place..." speech that Mom liked so much. Recently Mom had used that speech twice at church, once at school, three times at the grocery store, and once at the mall.

But Jaime had behaved during the funeral. It was Mom and Dad who acted up. If she were *their* parent, she would have bent *them* over her knee. She would take off her belt for once. But she wasn't the parent, and she didn't wear a belt, so she retreated from the kitchen door.

Jaime looked around the unfamiliar house. The living room was enormous, like a cave, only bigger. And it held treasures from all over the world. There were paintings, statues, tables, sofas, mirrors, and even a piano. There were little trees planted in bowls filled with pebbles. The trees had leaves made of some kind of glass

or crystal. Jaime wondered if the tiny plants grew crystal leaves because of the stones they were planted in. Certainly, the plant with a gold stalk had white leaves, and was planted in white pebbles. The green tree with the blue leaves was embedded in tiny, polished blue stones. Jaime considered the trees; obviously this was where glass came from. She had never given it much thought before, but now it was obvious to her that somewhere in the world farmers watered orchards of big trees planted in different colored pebbles and harvested truckloads of glass. Then the trucks took the glass all over the country for stuff like pickle jars and windows and bottles.

Jaime cringed as Mom called Dad one of her “R-rated” words. Jaime shook her head. Glass was made from melted sand or something. She had seen some guys in leather smocks blowing glass bottles at Williamsburg. Mom and Dad took her there for her eighth birthday the month before. They had stood together, hands clasped, smiling, as the workers brought the bright orange semi-solid from the oven. The worker blew into a pipe, and the blob expanded like a piece of bubble gum. Later it would cool and harden, a sickly green full of imperfections. That is where glass comes from.

Jaime knew that Dad would have been mad if he knew about Jaime’s glass-orchard daydream.

“Fantasy,” he had once told her after she got sent to the office for daydreaming in class, “is for those who don’t have anything to do in real life.”

She looked at her feet. That’s when she noticed the rugs. They were thick and soft, and carpeted the hardwood floor. The rugs had more colors than a box of crayons. They were woven with designs that knotted and twirled and ran laps around a field of circles and diamonds. Jaime counted the rugs. There were four in

the room. And each of the rugs was at least as big as her bedroom at home. Jaime wondered why Uncle James needed so many rugs. Probably so he could walk around the floor barefoot. With thick rugs like that, he wouldn't have to wear socks to keep his feet warm.

Jaime counted other things in the room. There were four curtains for the eight windows that looked over the lake. There were seventeen horses in the room; some of them were paintings, others were woven into one of the carpets. Several were statues. There were lots of statues. There was a statue of a horse large enough for Jaime to sit on. But she didn't dare. It was covered in tiny cracks, and she was afraid that she might break it if she sat on it. Jaime decided that Uncle James must have loved horses a lot. Once Jaime had asked Mom what Uncle James's job was.

"He paints horses," Mom had answered, "and people pay him for the pictures. Then he spends the money on useless junk and cigarettes."

Jaime liked horses, too. They were graceful and powerful, and even though their legs looked so thin, they could carry people and pull carriages without ever getting tired. Mom didn't like horses. Her sister, Aunt Justice, was killed by a horse. That was Mom's reason for forbidding Jaime to attend horse-riding camp. Jaime didn't see how something so beautiful could kill someone, but she decided Mom knew better about things like that. She didn't make a fuss and went to canoe camp instead.

Near the big horse statue there was a large cabinet with glass windows and lamps inside. The lamps lit small, porcelain statuettes of beautiful women with umbrellas and dresses. They looked too sunny, Jaime thought, to need umbrellas. They all wore

gowns the color of Easter eggs. The dresses looked big and uncomfortable, and completely covered the women, except for their hands and faces, and sometimes their arms and the top of their chests. Jaime was glad she only had to wear a sundress and stockings. Beside the case was a statue of a naked man just taller than Jaime. But he wasn't Jaime's age. He was a grown-up. Jaime felt bad for the man, having to stand there naked forever, never getting to wear pants if he wanted. She looked at all of the women, and the single naked man, and she wondered if they all just sat there and stared at him. And she suddenly felt very lonely.

In one corner of the room there was a folding screen like the kind women sometimes change clothes behind in movies. It was decorated with some white-skinned women brushing their long, black hair. Behind them there was a lake crossed by a red bridge. A tiger stood on the bridge, a flame burning above his head. The air above the women was crisscrossed with black brush-strokes. Jaime remembered that she had once asked Uncle James about it.

“Are they Chinese?” Jaime had asked. “That looks like the writing at China Buffet. And they have slanty eyes.” Uncle James had laughed.

“No, no,” he had answered, smiling. “They’re Japanese.”

“Japanese?” she asked. “What’s those?”

“That means they’re from Japan,” he explained. “That’s near China, but it’s an island.”

Jaime frowned. She could barely remember Uncle James. She couldn’t remember having ever visited his house before. Yet she remembered this conversation. Perhaps it had been at an art show where he bought it. Or maybe she had visited the house a long time ago.

Dad called Mom another nasty name, and Jaime slinked away from the voices, retreating until she had the entire cavernous room between her and her parents.

Jaime bumped into a closed door. A sign hung on the door by two pieces of clear tape. It was written out in Mom's super-neat handwriting: *Please Do Not Enter*. Mom always criticized Jaime's handwriting.

"How is your teacher supposed to be able to read this?" Mom had said waving one of Jaime's geography tests in front of her. "It's chicken scratch. Some day you're going to try to go to college and they're not going to let you in because they can't read your writing. Do you want that?" Then she had made Jaime practice writing her ABC's for an hour. Sometimes Jaime wished Mom would go to work and Dad would stay home.

Jaime read the sign on the door three times. She reached for the door handle, but pulled back again. If she went in, she would get in trouble. Mom was crying now. The big heaving sobs she put on for show, to make the rest of the family feel bad. Jaime didn't want to upset Mom any more.

Jaime shook her head. If Mom and Dad could act badly here, then so could she.

The room was almost empty. It smelled old. Or bad. She wasn't sure which. The floors were covered with a thin carpet the color of dead and dirty skin. The walls were pale blue. The room was cold. On the wall there was a beautiful painting. It was of a lake. Probably Uncle James's lake, Jaime thought. Green flowed down to the brown lakeside, which flowed into the deep blue-green water. A large white swan sat in the water. Its outstretched wings touched the swan's reflection, stirring the image. In the corner of the

room was an easel on which rested a painting of a beautiful lady sitting on a stump in the forest. Green vines wrapped around her feet, contrasting against the blue dress the woman was wearing. The sky wasn't painted, as if Uncle James hadn't finished it yet. The woman's hair was long and brown, just like Jaime's. And her eyes were bright green. Jaime realized that she might look just like this woman when she grew up. She shook her head, shaking free the idea, and looked at the back of the canvas. The name "Justice" was written on the back in spidery pencil. It was a picture of Aunt Justice, Mom's sister, Uncle James's wife. Jaime examined the painting again. It was the most beautiful picture in the world, she thought, and she hoped that someday someone would want to paint a picture of her. Jaime squeezed her eyes close so she wouldn't cry.

When she had beaten back the tears, Jaime glanced around the room. The only other thing in there was a bed. It wasn't a regular bed, but the kind Jaime had seen in the hospital rooms on TV. And there were some machines with little TV screens. All of them were dark, dead. Jaime's eyes widened.

Uncle James had died in this room.

He had died, all alone in this little room in this big house near the lake. He had died with no one to talk to, with no one to help him. He had died with no one to fix him oatmeal in the morning, or macaroni at night. And Jaime thought that was all terribly unfair. "Life isn't fair," Dad would say. Jaime couldn't understand why not. Why couldn't it be?

There was a cigarette lighter beside the bed. It was all silver metal with a top that flipped open. It was engraved with a design of a lion with wings, surrounded by flames. Jaime knew she was supposed to play with lighters or fire, but she was feeling



particularly rebellious. Jaime grabbed it and put it in her pocket. She wouldn't let Mom or Dad have it. They would never know about it. Just like they didn't know about the pipe in the woods behind her house where she hid when they were being really mean to each other. She would keep the forbidden lighter for herself. It was a lighter to remember him by.

Jaime wondered if all funerals were like this one. Mom told her on the way to Uncle James's house that she had been to two funerals before. One when Grandma died, and one when Aunt Justice died. Jaime couldn't really remember those funerals. But she had always had the impression that funerals happened outside, at a graveyard. Not in the person's house. When they got to the big house, lots of people were already there. Jaime didn't know most of them, and lots of them were really old. They had all stood sweating in front of the house as a preacher said a Bible verse about how everyone was a sheep, and Dad sprinkled some white dust out of a wooden box into the monkey grass. Jaime asked Mom what the dust was. Mom laughed a little and said "Those are Uncle James's ashes."

"Why did he collect ashes?" Jaime asked. Mom chuckled, gently touching a tissue to her cheek..

"No," she answered. "Those are the ashes of his body. He was cremated."

Jaime didn't think that was funny at all. She cried as Dad circled the yard, pouring the ash around the various trees and bushes. He shook it into the kudzu that crawled up all the trees and threatened to take over the whole yard. Afterwards, Jaime felt a little better about it. It was better that Uncle James got to go back into his trees in the end, rather than under a lifeless stone.

When Dad had finished, everyone went inside for refreshments. There had been cheeses and little sandwiches and fruits and even a cake. It reminded Jaime of a party, and she didn't think that this was the time for a party. Plus the sandwiches weren't even very good. They were filled with some kind of chunky, pink stuff that Mom told her was pimento cheese. Jaime didn't know what a pimento was, but it had to be pretty nasty to make cheese taste that bad. Everyone there seemed happy. They talked and laughed and caught up with each other's lives. Jaime just sat in a chair in the corner and watched. Eventually Mom found her, and paraded her around the room, introducing Jaime to her cousins and uncles and aunts, people she had never met before. Mom would tell them that it shouldn't take a funeral to get the family together. They would promise to visit more often. Jaime thought neither side believed what it was saying. It wasn't until afterwards, after all of the guests had left, that her parents had started arguing.

Jamie left Uncle James's room. Mom and Dad had stopped yelling at each other, and had gone all quiet like they usually did after a fight. It reminded Jaime of Carl and Luther, two of the kids at school. They were best friends, but then they'd fight over something and not talk for days. It was always over something dumb, like a plastic toy that changed from a tiger into a man and back again, or something like that. Boys argue over the dumbest things. Just like adults. But they would ignore each other for days, until they both realized how lame they were being. Then they would go back to being friends. Jaime didn't understand them; she thought it was silly. But she never tried to interfere. It was her Mom and Dad that were being silly, now, though, and this was not the time or the place for silliness.

Jaime marched into the kitchen. Mom was at the table, shaking, her head cradled in her arms. She had a glass of purple wine in her hand. Dad was cleaning the dishes in the sink. He was mumbling angrily to himself. Neither of them noticed her come in.

“Mom, Dad,” she commanded, centering all of her being on this speech, as if her entire life had led up to this moment. “Stop it. You’re being silly and mean and selfish. Just look at yourselves. Uncle James didn’t have anyone. He didn’t have anyone to fix him lunch or read him bedtime stories. Just a bunch of dolls and pictures and statues. He was all alone.” She shook, her fingernails digging into her palms, and waited. Dad stood perfectly still. Mom looked up, gazing sadly down at Jaime.

“Jaime, dear,” she said, “Uncle James wasn’t alone. He had two maids and a cook who kept him fed and helped him around the house.” Jaime stared, her mouth hanging open. Adults just don’t understand anything, she thought. A cook won’t kiss your knee when you scrape it. Maids don’t read you bedtime stories. She shook her head angrily and ran out of the kitchen, through the living room, and out the front door into the hot summer evening.

She ran past the monkey grass, still white with ash, through the bushes and the kudzu, down a pebble path towards the lake. As she rounded a curve, the gravel slid from under her feet and she fell down. She curled up there, screaming and crying. She didn’t shout any words, just groans of anger and grief. When her eyes dried she found herself staring into the eyes of another statue of the fat Asian man, this one made of stone. He was sitting on the side of the path, his hand raised in silent blessing. He was melting away; his features were already muted from years of rain, and he gazed at her sadly through the leaves piled around him. She stood up and pulled the

quatre-vingt-trois

leaves off of him, keeping a handful for herself.

She walked slowly down to Uncle James's dock. There stood alone a folding chair made of aluminum. Uncle James had probably used it to sit in while he painted the lake. But now the metal frame had rusted and what was left of the fibers that had made up the seat didn't look like they could support her, much less a full-grown man. Jaime put her leaves on the chair and looked out at the lake. The evening sun reflected red off the water, shimmering. In the sky, the clouds hung purple, pressing down against the distant pine trees. The pier was on a tiny peninsula that jutted out into the lake, so that the water disappeared behind her on both sides. As long as she stared ahead, she could imagine that she was on the front of a ship, nearing shore. The distant shore, the other side of the lake, scattered with swans. Some stood near the trees, pecking at the ground, but most of them were paddling slowly in the water. They were lazy and content. They weren't worried about anything.

Jaime wanted to go over there, to cross the lake to the swans, but there was no boat tied to the pier. Only her reflection looked up at her from the water. Jaime smiled a little, and her reflection returned the smile. She lied down on her stomach and reached for the water, trying to grasp the reflection's hand, outstretched in offering. But it was way out of reach, just like the swans. Jaime sighed and sat up, putting her hands into her pockets. They brushed the cold metal of the lighter. Jaime pulled out the lighter and traced her fingers across the lion design. She paused on the wings, and looked again at the swans. She wondered if one had to burn themselves like the lion on the lighter to get wings. She wondered if she could grow wings and learn to fly. She flipped open the lighter and looked at the inside. There was a little wheel and a

cloth wick that was blackened from past use. Jaime had seen her father use a lighter before; he would spin the wheel with his thumb and flame would appear. Jaime put her thumb against the wheel and found it surprisingly rough to the touch. She pushed down as hard as she could. The wheel spun, but nothing happened. She tried again. Still nothing. On the third try the lighter sprung to life. She picked up a leaf from the chair, passed it through the flame until it caught, and dropped it into the lake. The leaf went out before it hit the surface, its fire taken by the wind. She tried again, this time lying on her belly like before, lighting the leaf from just a few feet above the water. But again, the fire went out before it touched the water. Jaime sighed, and felt the tears coming back. She stood angrily and grabbed a stick with some dried leaves on it from the chair. She walked to the edge of the pier and stepped off. She hit the cold water with her hands above her head to keep the lighter and leaves dry. The water was only a couple of feet deep, and only came up to her waist. But the pier was way above her head now. Jaime's hair was sprinkled with water, and a drop rolled down her neck. She took a careful step and felt the mud sliding into her Sunday shoes. Her red dress was floating up, swirling around her, like blood in the water.

There were three leaves on the stick, one at the tip and one on either side. They were round and dead. They were the color of chocolate. Jaime carefully relit the lighter and lit the furthest leaf. She carefully tossed the lighter back up on dock. She watched, holding the torch at arm's length, as the flame slowly devoured the three leaves. They curled, blackening, collapsing under their own weight. Glowing orange around the edges, falling as bits of ash into the lake.

Jaime thrust the torch into the water, drowning the flames. A tear fell from her chin and dropped silently into the lake. She snorted, pulling mucus down her throat.

“Not fair,” she whispered sadly. She stood there in the water, staring at her dress. It would be ruined, but she didn’t really care. After a minute, she realized that she wasn’t very comfortable, and she climbed out of the cool water onto the shore. Her dress was heavy now, and the water poured off of the hem in sheets. Her stockings bubbled around her ankles where the water collected above her shoes. Jaime lowered her head and trudged sullenly back towards the big house. She left the lighter on the dock.



New Jeans: On Beginning

Dalton Rushing

I bought these jeans,
machine wash;
they look old
like I do
but they're new
like I feel, I think.
Amber and I
rode together and
picked them out.
She asked me if I
wanted to try them
on. I said, "no,"
of course, not
wanting to try
on this new, but as
soon as I got
home, I walked off
alone and made sure
new fit. It did,
barely, if I sucked
in my belly and
walked around with
puffy chest and with
tip-toe steps. This
was the look of
new, the cocky,
machine-wash
new, the puffed-out,
sucked-in
stomach of new.

The first time I wore
my new jeans
I was trying for a girl.
I dug out my old
high school shoes
and put on my
new jeans
and sizzled out
the door, nervous
like bacon in too
much grease.
My jeans were
nervous and
baggy over two
little legs. I
sat, legs folded,
foot thumping,
and I was the nervous,
scared, small feeling
of new.

I still wear those jeans—
they are becoming old—
and still try to
impress (myself, mostly),
and wondering
if my new
is sufficient
to cover my old.

This is a covered new,
a laundered new;
I am, myself,
machine-washed.

Wish

Eric Montgomery

“What will your momma say when she notices that you don’t stir in the morning?” I whispered in her cold ear. “I wonder if she heard your muffled cry as I clamped my clawed hand over your mouth. I don’t think she did. They never do.” I raked my long dark nails through her golden tresses and tossed them to the side. There was still a tear trailing down her cheek from her wide eyes. Her heart had stopped not to long ago, but I wanted to watch her spirit leave her body. You can always see it leave as the eyes begin to glaze over.

This was her momma’s fault because she wished for me. She told her precious daughter that if she ever misbehaved the Bogeyman would get her. Little did she know that I was listening and decided to indulge her. When the girl played outside the next day, I threw pebbles at the little girl when she was being naughty. She surprised me when she threw them back in my direction. Never had a human done that. Never in my hundreds of years had that happened. And it delighted me that she wanted to play. So, I decided to try something a little more drastic.

Sometimes, I would walk in a blur only in the corner of her sight when she would turn to look at me, I would run away.

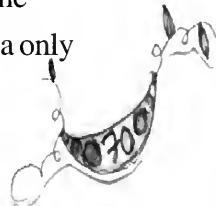
Sometimes, I would sometimes hide where there was no way of finding me, like under the floorboards, and laugh at her. I loved the little game we would play when she went to bed. She would pull her covers tight over her body as if it was cold in the room. I would then reach out from under her bed and yank the covers off of her as

she dozed off. She would then let out that lovely sound that made my skin crawl. First a whine and then a full out scream after she saw my hand pull back beneath the bed. Her momma would then come into the room and try to calm her back to sleep. But the little girl insisted that there was something under her bed pulling on the covers and that her momma scare it away. Her momma would comply and look at where I was lying. She never saw me even when she looked directly at me. Parents never can see me when they look for me, which is one of my greatest tricks.

I stayed around and kept the pranks up. The little girl was frantic that her mother wouldn't believe her and it was then that she made the mistake so many children always make when dealing with me. She wished out loud that I was real so her momma would know that I was there. For a split second the girl actually saw me. The real me with my matted black hair, bulbous yellow eyes, apelike face, and three-inch black claws. She screamed and grabbed her momma's waist to turn her around to make her see me. I darted out of sight.

Little children never realize how much magic is behind their wishes, especially if the want is strong enough. And I knew that the only way I could go back to my safe reality of not existing to the adults was to kill the wish. And in order to kill the wish, I had to kill the wish maker. So that night before the girl went to bed I slipped into her room again through the window and under the bed. Luckily I could flatten myself well enough that I would only be mistaken for a shadow if her momma looked for me.

Her momma led the girl in by the hand and tucked her into bed and then placed one of those intolerable night-lights on the bedside table. The girl begged for her to stay, but her momma only



cooed and told her that there was nothing to fear. She reassured her that the light would protect her from any nasties. I smiled at this and knew very well that there was no charm set to keep me from what I needed to do. The mother left and closed the door behind her. I waited till I knew everyone was asleep. I slithered out from under the bed and crouched by the side of the bed. I just stayed there listening to her calm breathing. Without looking, I reached over and unplugged the nightlight and then pounced on my little toy. I quickly pinned her arms down to the bed and sat on her chest. Before she could let out a scream, I clamped her mouth shut with one hand and then pinched her nose shut with the other. In a soft voice I cooed, “Shh. No tears. No tears. Your momma won’t hear you. So am I what you wished for?” Her legs flailed beneath me but I was too heavy for her to push off. Minutes passed and her feet were still twitching. After she was gone I arranged the little girl in a way that made it look like she was sleeping and left.

petals line the street

alone, a man walks above

crushing with each step.

-G. Keith Rogers, III



Black Belt

Victoria V. Harris

I'm from the "black belt!"
You know,
The county that is always on the news,
The county that attracts
...visitors, reporters, and fools
And these people find old people to use.

I am from a county,
Where they say life doesn't exist.
But it is kind of funny,
How many people are always down there to take a risk.

I'm from a county,
Where history is more than heritage.
Where family is more than friends,
Where the life of my loved ones begin.

I'm from the "black belt,"
The place that is said to be poor and poverty filled.
But it's funny how we can drive:
Tahoos, Expeditions, Explorers, Lexus', F350s, Aleros, Silverados,
That's just a few.
My list could go on and on.

Everyone assumes,
That they know the truth.
The truth about my county,
My family.
My history.
But they don't know,
It's all a mystery.

Because we're different,
In a world of our own.
Doesn't mean that you're right,
And we're wrong.

Though our actions and emotions,
Are rarely expressed,
Don't think that our lives,
Are a mess.

I'm from the "black belt,"
You see.
And that's the best part of the world,
To me.

Momma's Collection

Allison Shafer Brown

My momma is one of those heavy Southern ladies with big hair and bright clothes. She smokes a pack of Virginia Slims a day, and volunteers for the Red Cross. Her cigarettes are long and slender, and she lets them burn a good inch and a half before she ashes. And, she says can never find an ashtray. So my sister and I buy her one for every present-giving occasion. She has about fifty ashtrays.

The last one we bought her came from a truck stop in Slidell, Louisiana. It is an alligator and you put the cigarettes out in its mouth. It is muddy green, and the poor creature has the silliest grin on its face. She has five other animal ashtrays. Each bought at a truck stop. She has an armadillo, a crab, a donkey, a monkey and, my personal favorite, a talking bear. These animals make up ten percent of her collection, but a whopping twenty percent of her ashtrays are states. The porcelain kind also sold at truck stops that highlight the attractions and big cities with respective red dots. The other ashtrays are merely random objects or pieces of pottery we've found.

Momma's favorite, or so she says, is a crystal and rose quartz one with a depression in the center for easy extinguishing of cigarettes. When she can find it, she carries it around with her. Once, she left it in the garden next to the French hydrangea. We will never understand why she smokes while gardening, and why she would need that ashtray outdoors when there is a fixed stone one by the pool.

Cammie, my sister, found, by far, the most interesting ashtray in a knick-knack store on Highway 11 in Bibb County. It is a portly porcelain man bent over with his butt crack showing. On the back of his t-shirt it says, "Say no to crack." Just to make the ashtray more interesting the inventor makes it so you put the cigarettes out on the crack. Momma didn't like that one so she hid it in a cabinet somewhere.

When Cammie and I get bored, we go around the house collecting the ashtrays. Last time, we found forty-six and arranged them on a bookshelf near the living room. We couldn't remember what the three of the four missing ashtrays were, but we know she was missing Delaware. Momma said that she always liked that one and couldn't remember the last time she used it. I don't know why Momma would have liked that one so much—she's never been past the Mason-Dixon Line. Besides, whatever happens in Delaware anyway?

This year for her New Year's resolution, Momma has given up smoking. She got on the patch and is doing well. I thought that she would want to give up her ashtray collection—I thought it would be easier to quit if she didn't have reminders all around the house—but she didn't. She said, "It was a reminder of her past transgressions," whatever that means. So she kept the collection on the bookshelf Cammie and I had put them on. Even though she has quit smoking, we still bring her ashtrays—I'm sure this not smoking thing is a phase anyway.

Homecoming

Lauren McClendon

My skin is sticky,
like the bed, sheets, room, air.
I keep the light off, not sure
why I'm sneaking around.
I wade through the books, papers,
and binders stacked
and sprawled in front of my bed.
It's my fault for being too
busy to clean my space,
so I don't yelp when I whack
my knee on some hard edge.

The window is cracked.
I wish it would rain and
get it over with. Humidity
strangles the air.
The wind groans,
burdened by moisture. It lifts
up the fiberglass slats of my ceiling—
noisy, eerie,
but too damn hot to close the window.

My clothing smells like
the Marlboro Menthol Lights
he smokes.
I peel
off my shirt, jeans, bra.
In the dark, I sift
through a mound of clothing,
trying to find something that smells like me.

I roll over, half
expecting to see him
lying there,
half expecting a fight over who gets the
left side of the bed.
I roll onto my back,
sweat makes my hair cling to my face.
I swipe it back.
It still smells like his smoke.



Coffee

Christin Ann Buttel

My coffee is growing cold, as am I.
Leaning over my cup, brooding,
I stir circles repetitively with my spoon,
As if I am pensive and poetic.
The murmur of feigned intellect,
Desired images, and intentional obscurities come together
to form the sound of one withering
Conversation

An empty hum and an empty attempt to justify differences.
And I stand up on the table,
In a great and delicate confidence
Naked.
Wholly unclothed and free of other dressings
free of image and methods
free of judgment and judging
free of class and classification.
The audience is not disillusioned and
uncomfortably resorts to laughter.
Circus freaks laughing with one another in the leisure of the crowd
not under the heat of the stagelights.



Fireflies

Liz Patty

Owen thought kayaking would be a relaxing first get away for the couple Hannah thought was too swiftly maturing. As Owen sat rocking on the rotting front porch, she made up the one twin bed that occupied a majority of the cabin where they would be spending the weekend.

“Oh, wow. Come outside.” Owen leaned back heavily in the handmade, wooden rocking chair. The cabin faced the woods, away from the river they would kayak the next morning.

Hannah finished lining the bed with a third layer of fitted sheets and stepped onto the porch. It was July in Tennessee, and pitch dark. “It looks like Christmas, doesn’t it?” She stared at the thousands of trees billowing like dark clouds on the navy sky. Millions of fireflies threaded in between and around the trunks, branches, leaves, blinking on and off like lights on a Douglas fir.

“I could live here.” Owen looked back at her with a one-sided smile, one eyebrow raised. Hannah ignored him.

“I’ve never seen this many fireflies. I killed one once, I’ll never forget.” Hannah paused, remembering the glowing liquid as it had drained from the creature she had crushed, mid-blink, with the end of a tree branch as it rested on a blade of grass in her back yard. Even at six years old, Hannah had constantly acted on her overwhelming curiosity without seriously considering the consequences.

“Want to go in...to bed?” Owen stood up and moved beside Hannah and ran his fingers down her right arm.



Hannah paid little attention to Owen as she remembered having hid in the bathroom and prayed until she could do nothing else but cry. It was the aftermath that scared her most, less than the act.

“Sure,” she said, attempting a smile for Owen’s sake. *And afterwards?* she thought, as she walked halfway around the bed and pulled off her shoes.

At ten-thirty, Owen was at last asleep. Hannah tiptoed to the doorway and hurried toward the trees where the fireflies continued to dance about. She could not escape the feeling that these fresh insects somehow knew what she had done.

“I only wanted to know,” she yelled, thinking only later, after their return to the city the next day, after she stopped taking his calls, that Owen might have heard. As her knees hit the ground, she felt instant regret for coming here at all. She blindly reached her hand up into the air and clenched her fist.

The glow ran slowly down her arm, and the flashing all around her turned cold.

July, 1999

Elizabeth Frye

The fish flaps against the metal floor,
littered with pine straw and dead spiders.
I watch its heaving mass of scales and muscle
choke and pray for life.

Smiling, you pull the hook from its gaping mouth,
tearing the tender tissue
widening the wound.

I take another sip from the Corona
The sun climbs into the bottle,
Swims in the amber liquid,
then plunges down my throat.

I remember two summers ago
when my mother nearly force-fed us
blueberry pancakes and tomato sandwiches,
those days when your new car was a sagging brown Plymouth,
the tree air freshener reaching out
from the REAR-VIEW MIRROR
to embrace fumes of pot and dirty t-shirts
with insincere detergent breath.

Ripples approach the boat, wave goodbye after us
as if we were moving fast, as if we were going somewhere.
Legs cramping, I stand up and pull my line in,
its tiny string of plastic skidding across the water.
You grab my bare calf, jokingly,
Your eyes comic spheres of round and black.
My sunburned hand reaches for the silver edge of the boat,
knowing with one arm, one finger, one eye,
you would push me overboard.

Mose T

Brooke Emfinger

A beer tab,
Pabst Blue Ribbon,
Fastened against weathered ply board,
Draped on a nail,
Flush with the frame of my door.
Warped and with pock-marked ridges
The board rests, Redeemed by the work of two hands
That are black-almond and agile,
The knuckles worn by years of tribute to his craft.

Underneath his peppered crown,
A mind of epic creativity,
Of abstract thought far beyond
Scrolls of yellow paint flaking
From the two-story wood house
On Sayer Street,
Caddy-corner the “project”
District of downtown Montgomery.
A mind working faster than
His area heater, now propelling
Streams of perspiration down the
Foreheads of buyers who enter
That screen door on Sayer.
A mind that steadies his eyes upon
Cartoonish paintings of Martin Luther King, And Malcolm X,
Before allowing his hands,
Slender and slick,
To stroke scraps Of board scattered
Along the lumber-yard of
Near-by Bear Construction.

And as this mind stoops over

osiemdziesiąt

His raw material—the artist,
The way God must have intended,
He knows not the way in which
Buyers will inflate his brilliant brush Strokes in savvy New Orleans
boutiques,
Stealing his soul as he sits
Haggard in bed,
Wearing his acrylic-spotted Dockers
And Jerzee T-shirt bearing the name of
Some stylish French bakery lost
In the French Quarter—
A buyer's pathetic token
Of penance for casting cares Upon the weight of his two hands,
Now slivered and pruned.

All the while, it is this man,
This soft spirit of Scottsboro, Tuskegee, Midway,
Who holds Old Milwaukee's Best in one Hand, a painters brush in
the one free,
And grins as he forms
First one chartreuse wing and then the other,
A pale blue cross uniting the two,
Branded on a body of harvest gold.
His signature in letters of elementary fashion,
A backward "S" fitted between "M," "O," and "E."

I would like to think that as he lies down First his chartreuse tipped
brush
And then, emptied silver can,
For one stagnant moment,
His chocolate-cherry lips break into A smile of adoration,
Not of the crowds that his work will attract, But of knowing,
Knowing that he has divined something
No seer-suckered salesman can purchase.

**SCENE
MISSING**



I Don't Move At All

John Seay

My ex-wife Pamela called tonight, which reminded me of this dream I've been having since I moved out to Jackson, Mississippi a year ago. Even though it worries me whenever I have it, for some reason I didn't get to really thinking about it until after I hung up the phone. As usual, she called at about one in the morning, just as I'd finally gotten around to feeling tired. I knew it was her before I even answered. All night I'd had one of those feelings that something was up. I figured it'd be her because she calls late at night every couple of weeks or so anyway, either to pry some money out of me or tell me how irresponsible I am. Sometimes she does both during the same conversation, which doesn't exactly help me in giving up drinking, which is why I came out here to Jackson in the first place. At any rate, I figured I must be due for another chewing out to make quitting more interesting. When the phone rang, I muted the TV and took a deep breath. For better or worse, I picked it up and said hello.

“Tommy is sick again,” she said. She went right into it, speaking quickly. Her voice faltered a little as she talked and I had to struggle to catch the gist of what she was saying. “I need money, Jean, I need it bad,” she was telling me.

Tommy is my son by Pamela. She's the only wife I've ever had and we've been separated now for about a year. Being separated is different from being divorced, but I call her my ex anyway just to get used to the sound of it. Tommy is four. He has this gastro-intestinal disease, which sounds intimidating but

thankfully turned out to be pretty mild. His stomach lining is thin and for a while the doctors told us it was in danger of eroding in a few places, not that you can believe everything they tell you anyway. He's doing better now, thanks to the expensive medicine he takes, but still I'd like to see him to believe it. I haven't seen him since my wife and I separated, which might be for the better judging from the amount of drinking I've been trying not to do recently.

I didn't worry too much about Tommy when Pamela told me he was sick because she tends to trouble too much about things. Chances were he wasn't even sick at all. Instead of worrying, I stayed calm and waited for her to continue, thinking she'd calm herself down as she went. She didn't say anything else, so I asked her what had happened, was it bad, wasn't the medicine working, and so on. I played like I didn't know she was bullshitting me. She answered as best she could, fumbling over the names of the medicine, like she does. Of course I knew Tommy wasn't sick, at least not any worse than usual. At any rate, nothing his medicine and maybe a trip to the doctor in the morning wouldn't fix. I told her that and on the other end of the line I could hear her open and close her mouth a few times. She was trying not to cry, I could tell. I could tell she was ashamed, too. I couldn't help but feel a little sorry for her. It seemed like every week she was slipping more and more and trying to drag me down with her. She had me curious as to what was really up, so I took the line she was baiting me.

"Pamela," I said, "Pamela, tell me what's really bothering you."

I turned up the volume a little bit on the TV. There was a show on about the Wild West. I used to really love those old John Wayne cowboy movies. As I turned the volume up a bit, I knew

she was winding the phone cord around her fingers. I could see it. She'd probably wound it so tight that her fingers were white—even the one that used to wear the wedding ring I gave to her ten years ago. That's a curious thing about people—that they don't come out and say what they want to say when they want to say it. Now John Wayne—there's a guy who says exactly what he means. I thought about that while I watched more about the Wild West on TV.

“Jean,” she said softly after I don’t remember how long.
“Gary left me.”

I muted the TV again and said “Yeah” as if I’d seen it coming even though I hadn’t. Not by a mile, I admit it. I didn’t think they were finished dragging each other down yet. I reached for my drink and took a big swig before I remembered it was just RC Cola. I guess I also admit that I’ve thought a lot about Pam. About just driving back to Birmingham to get her. But then there was always my health to consider. It’s not that I don’t want to help Pam, or see Tommy; it’s just that I’m busy trying to stay clean. Drinking RC Colas with lime juice to give it the feeling of something mixed into it.

Now Gary—there’s someone I definitely think about. Gary and I used to work together at the plant. He oversaw the assembly line and I worked as an independent electrician and then after awhile as his subordinate directly for the company. Before we became friends, Gare—that’s what I always called him before he went behind my back with my wife—he used to call the house and leave messages about work and company-sponsored picnics and things like that. He didn’t know us and we didn’t know him at first, but Pam and I used to chuckle at his messages. They had this screwy cadence to them. We’d play them over dinner and laugh.

He'd say, "Hello... Gary... here... callingformisterJean... Reynolds...." "Who is this guy?" Pamela would ask. I would tell her it was some friend of hers, not mine, and we'd laugh and then maybe drink some wine and fool around a little. I miss nights like those. We used to kid about that kind of stuff a lot, before the kidding turned into accusations.

But to cut to the chase, Gare and I became friends. I thought he was a real stand-up guy. Sure, he did a few drugs, but then I did too. The drugs didn't become a real problem for him until later. We'd go for a drink after work every now and again, and then every night after work after awhile. He ate dinner at our place, and us at his. He had a girlfriend... Jennifer, I think, but that doesn't matter now because the point is that he started seeing my wife behind my back, Tuesdays and Thursdays, I found out later, at the Motel 6 behind the hardware store and wherever else they had the chance. And now he'd left her. And had I seen it coming? Hell no.

But apparently he did it and Pamela had called me up to tell me about it and to try to get some money out of me, to boot. I was mad about that and I had a right to be mad. I guess I'm still a long way from forgiving her even after a year away. I might never completely forgive her for what she did. I held the phone out a little from my ear so that I could just hear her voice.

"He left me, Jean...me and Tommy," she was saying. "Your son, Jean—do you remember him? All those nights you'd come home.... Where are you, Jean? Will you tell me that? Will you pay me that privilege—to know where the father of my child is?"

She'd managed to talk herself into anger. I didn't say

anything. I swished an ice cube around in my mouth and wished for a glass of straight vodka. She kept talking.

“Jean.” She was talking quickly now. “Give me your address and I’ll drive over tomorrow, huh? Are you there, Jean? Jean. Come on, I’ll bring Tommy. He misses you. I miss you, Jean. Jean? You there? Are you listening? Answer me, you bastard. You never gave a fuck about us anyway. Wire me some money. I gotta get outta here, Jean.” Now she was crying. “Not everyone can just pick up and leave when things get bad, Jean.”

“Yeah, some people just have affairs, huh, Pamela,” I said. I was glad I said it. It felt good.

“That’s not fair, Jean. Wire me some money. Where are you....”

“A sacred bond, Pamela. Between a man and his wife, goddamit.”

She was getting hysterical like she does and I didn’t feel like talking to her anymore so I hung up. It would only be a matter of time before she’d bring up my drinking, anyway. Calling me a drunk, asking me if I could see salvation looking through the bottom of an upturned bottle of vodka. She was particularly proud of that one. She liked to talk about salvation when she found herself in a corner, especially my salvation. I went to the kitchen to fix myself a small toddy from my emergency stash and unplugged the phone.

She didn’t used to get hysterical like that. Of course, for that matter I wasn’t always a drunk. We met in High School and married soon after graduation, before I went to technical college to be an electrician and before she started working as a secretary. We met though a random assignment of lab partners in a High School chemistry class, not that it really matters. We used to tell people



that there was chemistry between us right when we first met, just to make people gag. People say odd things when they're in love. We were happy for a while too, after we married. We were poor, but we were happy. At least I think we were happy then. It's hard to remember after all the other stuff that happened.

But back then we used to talk about our future. Our future together. Husband and wife. We talked about having a baby and about how we were gonna raise it. We said things to each other that should have been eternal. Pamela wanted to have a baby. We tried real hard. That part was fun. Then, for a while Pamela thought there was something wrong with her, something that couldn't be fixed. Things got tense. Looking back, I blamed her for not getting pregnant. I think, in a funny way, she wanted to be blamed, too. Like maybe being some kind of martyr made things easier on her. Sometimes I don't understand that girl. Other times, I think I understand her too much and that's why we have problems. Like there's a part of me in her now that I can't stand to see.

But about the baby, things went on like that for a year or two. Having sex became an assignment and then it stopped altogether. I started going to the bar after work and not coming back home until late. We started to really quarrel. We even started talking about other words that can be eternal, like divorce. But then, miraculously, it happened—Pamela got pregnant with Tommy. I imagined that things would get better between us. Both of us did, really. I was even getting used to the idea of being a father. It didn't really scare me as much anymore. But Pamela started acting weird after Tommy was born. She started acting crazy, losing her temper a lot—getting hysterical over things. Sure, I'd go out

drinking, but now if I came home drunk she wouldn't let me near Tommy, and sometimes not even into my own house. When I'd come home and find the door locked, I'd do the only reasonable thing a man could do—turn around and do some more drinking, sometimes renting a hotel room somewhere in town, sometimes bringing someone back to it to keep me company.

But the one thing I never did during those times was hit her. Well, she says I hit her once, one night when I forced the front door open. She said I threatened to take Tommy and then hit her. I was drunk, she says. I don't remember doing any of that.

It wasn't long before Pamela quit her job as a secretary at the doctor's office, even though having somewhere to be everyday might have helped her out. We didn't talk hardly at all after that. We didn't make love either. About that time I really laid into the drinking.

I drank gin, bourbon, and wine—mostly the bad, cheap wine you find at gas stations. I tried not to discriminate, especially if money was low. But most of all, I drank vodka. I'd drink vodka and ice, vodka and orange juice, or any kind of juice that I could find. I drank vodka and coffee. I even used vodka to thin out pancake batter once, before I remembered that the heat would kill the alcohol, and ended up sitting in front of the TV eating the batter with a spoon, trying to keep Tommy from crawling away where I couldn't keep my eye on him.

Even though I was pretty out of it then, I found out about her and Gary and the Motel 6 and probably in my bed when I was at work and God knows where else. There was a fight. Things were thrown. I finished off a bottle of vodka and threw it at her. I moved to Jackson, Mississippi. Just packed up and moved one

day. Collected my final check and flat out moved to Jackson. I bought a week's supply of booze, loaded my car up with some juices in a cardboard box, and started driving for one last binge. What can I say? It seemed like a good idea at the time. I moved because I couldn't take one day longer around Pamela and Gary. I couldn't take one more day in that house. So I told Tommy goodbye—he was only two, then—and drove off. Somewhere between Birmingham and Jackson I lost my wedding band. Either that or sold it. Not that it was worth much anyway.

Eventually I found my way to an Econo Lodge just outside of Jackson, which is where I'm staying now, trying to give up the drink for good. The owner lets me mow the lawn and water the plants and do odd jobs in exchange for a free room and a little bit to live on. I also work on the electrical outlets and things like that, seeing how that's what I'm trained to do. He's a good guy, the owner. His name is Mike and he's always wearing these bright Bermuda shorts and a wide-brimmed straw hat. I told him what I was going through and he told me he understood. He told me he and his wife separated a few years back, and they'd only just now gotten divorced officially. He told me she ended up marrying her divorce lawyer. Imagine that.

For a while I tortured myself with the idea that Pam and Gary might get married. After all, Pamela wasn't sad when I left her—not really anyway—so why wouldn't she marry him? The thought of Gary raising Tommy made me furious. More than once Mike found me drunk in the parking lot late at night, trying to drive back to get my son, not that I had a clue what I'd do with him once I got him. It's a bumpy ride in the wagon, Mike would tell me, so it's okay to fall out every now and again as long as you keep

jumping back on. He'd tell me stuff like that as he pulled me away from my car—his bright blue Bermuda shorts giving off this glow, reflecting the hotel lights.

But it turns out I didn't even need to worry about Gary being a father to the son I hadn't seen in a year. Instead of things getting better for Pamela and Gary after I left, things started to get worse. She started reading the Bible more, but only got more scared and anxious about everything. That's when she started using words like 'salvation.' Sure, she had Tommy, but even he had his stomach problems she had to deal with. I tried to send money to them whenever I could, for Tommy that is, and I sent a card on his birthday but I don't think she gave it to him. At least I'm pretty sure I sent it—I definitely bought it. On top of that, from my understanding, Gary started drinking more and his other habits got worse as well. They were flat broke. Broker than me. Probably the only two people in the world broker than me.

But here's the kicker: I try not to, but I worry about her sometimes when I can't sleep. On those nights I'm up real late pacing and trying not to drink. My hands tremble and I get the shakes all over. Instead of Pamela, I usually think about Tommy, about how I haven't seen him, about how I want to see him, but that leads me back to Pamela and then to Gary and her, and so on. I told myself for a while that once I cleaned up, maybe we'd give it another shot. It's foolish, I know. But Pamela seems to keep running herself into the ground lately, and I don't know how I could help her. I've got enough problems myself that I'm still trying to work through. Honest to God, sometimes I feel like I'm paralyzed out here. Like I'm stuck. Like I can't breathe.

Which, after I unplugged the phone, is really what got me

thinking about the dream. I finished my drink as I thought about it. I sat for a second and let the dream play back in my mind, trying to remember all the details of it, and wondering why I hadn't thought much about it earlier. What happens in the dream is this: I'm at a party. I don't know whose party it is or why I'm there, and I guess it's not important. I don't feel out of place at the party, but I'm standing alone with my drink, which was a gin and tonic in the first dream and vodka with a splash of water in the second. Then, all of a sudden, I know that Gary is there, and that Pamela is there too, even though I don't see them. It doesn't seem to bother me too much, because I keep drinking my drink and kind of leaning against the wall as people I don't know pass me.

Then I see Pamela. She's wearing this blue gauzy dress, and I recognize it as a dress she would wear when we used to drive out into the country with some wine and packed lunches. I see her in glimpses because people keep passing in between us. Then, I see her reach for some crackers or something on a table next to her. She starts to eat them and the next thing I know, she's choking. She clutches at her throat and starts looking back and forth and her eyes get real big. I can see her neck turn red against the blue of her dress. She looks straight at me and falls to the floor. That's when the other people at the party, people I don't know, move in to try to help. I don't know where Gary is, but in the dream I don't even think about him.

Someone stoops down to help her. Again, some guy I don't know. He starts shaking her, and then tries to give her the Heimlich. After a few attempts, he looks up and looks straight at me. I mean he looks right at me and points at me and says, "You, call 911." He says that as he looks right at me like in a high school

health film. I don't think anyone's ever looked at me more directly than he does then. "Can you hear? Are you listening? Are you drunk? Call 911." He keeps saying this to me all the while pointing and looking right at me. And about then, I usually wake up.

Right now outside my window I hear cars pulling into the hotel even though it's well after three in the morning. Mike insists on doing the booking himself, even late at night. He sleeps on this old leather couch full of holes with the stuffing coming out like some kind of gutted animal. I've tried to convince him to let me do the booking, seeing as how I'm up all hours anyway. But that's one good thing about Mike: he's always up, and if I catch him after someone's just hit him up for a room, he's usually game for a drink or two, and maybe a good John Wayne movie, both of which sound like good ideas to me right now. I need to distract myself from all of this. I need to get some sleep.

You see, the thing that always gets me about the dream, the thing that won't get out of my head, is that I don't move when Pamela starts choking. I start getting the shakes all over like I need a drink, even though I have one in my hand. I'm watching Pamela and soon I can't breathe myself but everyone's looking at me, expecting me to do something. It's not that I don't want to help Pamela; it's just that I keep standing there against the wall watching her, trying to catch my own breath. I don't move an inch. I try to take a drink from my glass. I can feel the liquid hit my tongue, but I don't move at all. And that's what gets me the most about the dream: I don't move at all.





